

Travel Bumping

George Towner

Privately Printed
2004

Limited Edition

© 2004 George Towner

Contents

Starting Out	5
The Far East	7
Indochina	19
Burma	29
Assam	37
India	45
Nepal	65
Afghanistan	73
The Middle East	81
The Holy Land	95
Egypt	103
Greece	117
Turkey	127
Southern Africa	133
Central Africa	147
North Africa	171
Eastern Europe	187
Russia	199
Western Europe	209
France	225
The Pacific	237



The author and his \$83 motor scooter in front of the youth hostel in Sorrento, Italy. April, 1961.

Starting Out

CLINGING TO MY SEAT in a rattletrap Iranian bus, somewhere between Zahedan and Shiraz, I mused about writing a book. It was to be called “The Travel Bums” and in it I proposed to chronicle the adventures of kids like myself, who put together a few hundred bucks and went backpacking to India. That was in 1960. It was before the Beatles, before hippies, before Vietnam. The early 1960’s ushered in a golden era of land travel across Asia and Africa.

I never wrote that book. I finished my trip around the world, went back to work, became an electronic engineer. But I didn’t stop traveling. In 1967 I went to live in the south of France, and after a year I continued around the world eastward, through India and across the Pacific. In 1977 and 1981 I crossed Asia again by land, and in 1984 I trekked the length of Africa. In every case, my guiding principle was to stick to the ground. Buses, trains, and native hotels showed me the world in a way that United Airlines and Hilton never could.

Later I married Danielle and raised a family. My style of traveling became more conservative. Nevertheless, in 1997 I shepherded Dany and our 11-year-old daughter overland from Delhi to Darjeeling, sleeping three nights on the Indian trains. Dany and I also traveled extensively in Egypt, Russia, the Caribbean, Turkey, East Africa, Thailand, and Costa Rica, as well as driving all over Europe.

During my years of travel bumming I took photos. Not just frame after frame of buildings and landscapes, but candid pictures of people, artworks, signs, animals, and miscellaneous objects that aroused my curiosity. For years the slides and negatives piled up in a couple of cartons, ravaged by the stresses of age and the forces of chemistry. Some of them started turning blue, others became reddish, and all of


them darkened alarmingly. Finally technology came to the rescue. Thanks to the magic of computers, I was able to digitize and restore most of the images to something like their original state.

This book is the result. It’s a picture album that memorializes my years of travel bumming. It’s not exactly the book I fantasized some forty years ago on that jolting ride across the dusty Iranian desert, but it’s as close to it as I’m going to get.

It’s mainly a personal account; one reason I wrote it was to help my kids understand why their father occasionally gets that faraway look in his eye. But it’s also a record of a kind of travel that has become nearly impossible today. Many of the places I visited are no longer safe, and some of the roads I trekked are no longer passable.

My biggest hope is that the reader will enjoy browsing through these bygone scenes as much as I enjoyed being in them.

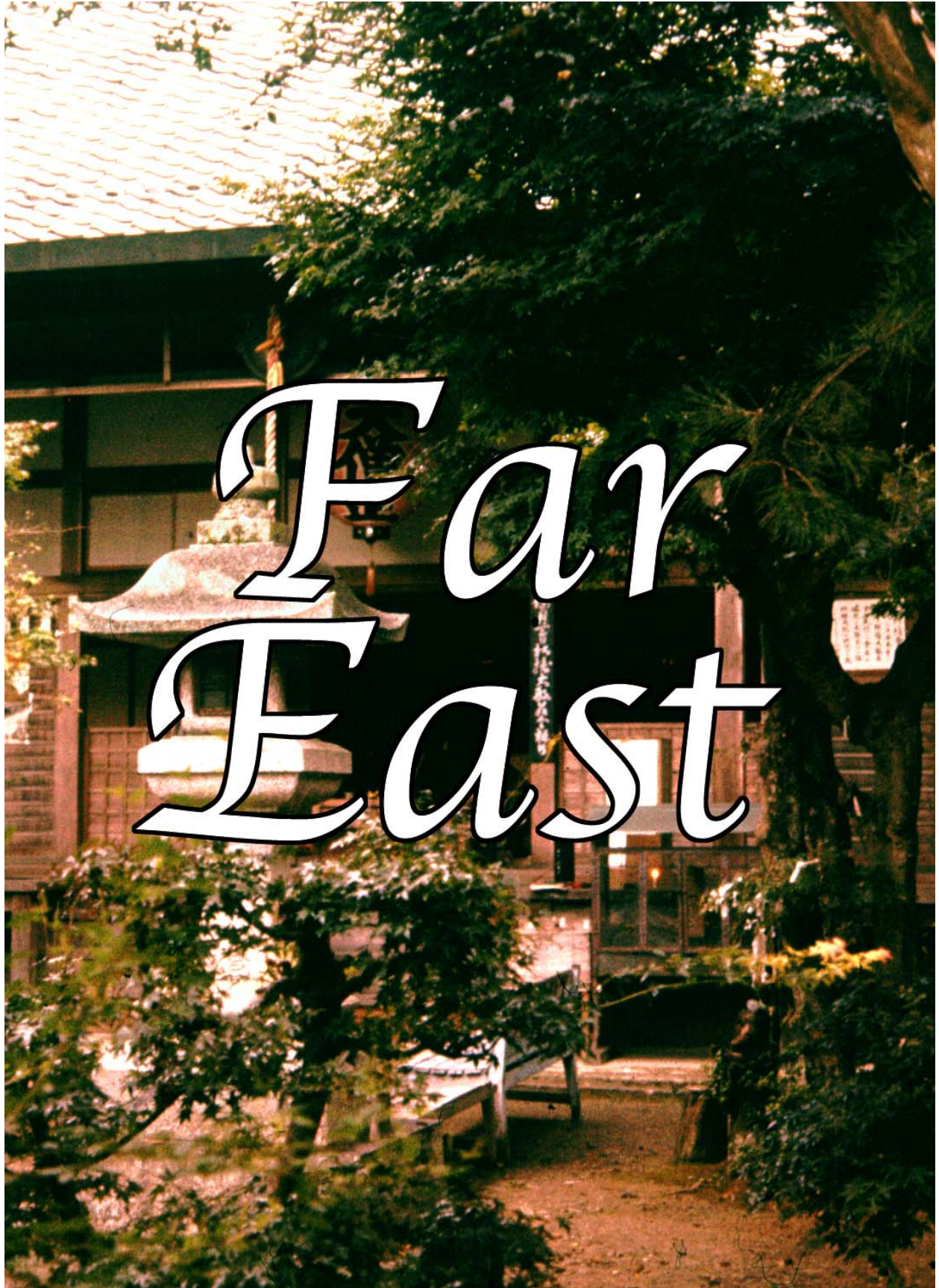
George Towner
Sunnyvale, California, 2004

 *My career as a travel bum began in the Spring of 1960. I had been working as a research engineer for a small, struggling company, but a brief look at their finances convinced me that they would run out of money by the end of summer. So in May I bought a one-way ticket on a cargo ship to Japan, scheduled to leave San Francisco on August 15. I sold my car and stored my books in a friend’s garage.*

On the appointed night, the ship plowed its way under the Golden Gate Bridge and I watched the lights of San Francisco sink behind me. As I stood at the afterrail, the prospect of high adventure collided with a stab of apprehension. I was trekking off to Asia, and there was no backing out.

When you've seen one World, you've seen them all.

*Philosophical observation
by a German travel bum;
Baluchistan, 1960*



Travel Bumming: The Far East



The catchment was green and slimy, but clean, cool water came out of the dragon's mouth. Inside a Shinto shrine, 1960.

Overleaf: Shinto shrines in Japan were down-home, not flashy like Buddhist temples. The worshippers clapped their hands to get the gods' attention, then made their pitch. Some shrines were decorated with sacred stones dressed up in little aprons.



Although the entrances to Buddhist temples in Kyoto all followed the same basic design, I found this one particularly gorgeous. 1960.

THE CARGO-PASSENGER SHIP *President Cleveland* docked in Yokohama early in the morning of August 29, 1960. I had paid \$300 for a one-way ticket from San Francisco—two weeks at sea with a one-day stop in Honolulu. My ticket bought me a berth in “hatch dormitory,” tiers of bunks three-high in the freighter’s cleaned-up cargo hold.

I elected a bunk in the top tier, a snug aerie above the nighttime coughing and snoring. My baggage consisted of a sleeping bag and an awkward suitcase, which I traded for a backpack as soon as I reached Japan.

Most of my bunkmates turned out to be elderly Japanese going home to die. During the empty days they sat on the wooden benches that lined the bulkheads and stared at the sea. It was not exactly the Love Boat.

However, there were a few American kids aboard like myself, setting off to wander Asia. We swam in the ship’s pool and got sunburned. I tried to flirt with a girl who was going to Hawaii, but she saw no future in knowing

someone who was about to disappear into God-knows-where.

Discovering Japan

Although Yokohama was my first landfall, it looked like a big, dirty, industrial city; it was not the Japan of temples and geishas that I was looking for. So as soon as I had cleared customs, I headed for the train station and found the commuter express to Tokyo.

In 1960, Japan was not yet the economic juggernaut she later became. Japanese cameras had a reputation, but nobody in the US bought Japanese cars and “made in Japan” still implied Mickey-Mouse quality. Yet Tokyo, newly rebuilt fifteen years after we bombed it to rubble, was said to represent “the future” of cities. I took a room at the YMCA and hit the town.

The big department stores—Mitsukoshi, Matsuya, and the like—were a revelation. They were exciting: filled with art exhibitions, giant display sculptures, and piped-in classical music. The Mitsubishi showroom serenaded its

Travel Bumming: The Far East

customers with Sibelius's Fourth Symphony—not the sort of elevator music you'd hear in America. If that was the future of merchandising, I was all for it.

I also loved the short-order restaurants, where examples of all the day's dishes were displayed in the window. You pointed to a dish, paid for it, and received a plastic token, which you gave to the waitress; no language was necessary.

I stayed in Tokyo long enough to soak up the ambience and buy a camera, then headed south to find the heart of Old Japan.

Temple-Crawling in Kyoto

The train to Kyoto was a local; it was not the famed Bullet Express, but it followed the same postcard route, past neat green rice fields under the brow of Mount Fuji. It hewed to a fanatically precise schedule, for which the white-gloved conductor seemed to feel personally responsible. Finding that the train was running two minutes late, he became frantic and I worried that he was about to commit ritual *seppuku* in the vestibule. I was ready to help restrain him if he suddenly produced the fatal dagger.

Japanese Hosteling. In 1960 Japan had the world's best youth hostels—modern, clean, and cheap. I stayed for a week at the Kyoto hostel, using it as a base for touring the temples and shrines at Katsura, Shigakuin, and Nara.

At five each afternoon the hostel staff filled a huge wooden tub with hot water and the boys piled in. Half an hour later they emptied the tub, refilled it, and it was the girls' turn. To this day the scent of steam rising from fresh pine wood says "Japanese youth hostel" to me.

Chaos at Dinner. The scene in the hostel cafeteria was a classic of cross-culturalism. The Western kids struggled with chopsticks, while the Japanese kids studied the mysteries of silverware. It boiled down to eating with one hand versus eating with two. Some of the Japanese tried to hold fork and spoon together, like a French waiter serving vegetables, while a few Americans put bowl to mouth and used the chopsticks to pry out the contents. Lots of food got lost, and some kids resorted to primitive finger grubbing.

Youth Hostels

THE IMAGE OF A YOUTH HOSTEL as summer-camp housing inhabited by noisy teenagers is only partly true. In the 1960s, hostels ranged from basic wooden cabins to entire castles, and some of the travelers who stayed in them were in their 70s. Only in Bavaria and Switzerland was there an age limit—25.

A typical hostel was a large house remodeled into 4-bed dormitories plus a simple communal kitchen. You paid less than a dollar to put your sleeping bag on one of the beds and start your morning with bread and cocoa. You had to be out during the day and often your stay was limited to three days. Hundreds of hostels dotted Europe, Japan, the US, and Canada. To get into them, you bought a passcard and a set of maps in your home country.

Youth hostels were great places to pick up information; you could always find somebody who had just come from the place you were headed for next. They also provided some camaraderie in the evenings. Inevitably someone would haul out a guitar and launch into the Saturday Night song:

*Ev'rybody loves Saturday night;
Ev'rybody loves Saturday night;
Ev'rybody, ev'rybody, ev'rybody, ev'rybody,
Ev'rybody loves Saturday night.*

The trick was to sing it in as many languages as you could:

*Tout le monde aime Samedi soir... etc.
Alle Menschen lieb Samstagabend... etc.*

You scored extra points if you could sing it in an obscure language such as Hausa:

Bobo waro fero Satodeh...

...and so on into the night.

Templeschmerz. It was in the hostel at Kyoto that I first encountered your typical German travel bum crossing Asia. Dieter had compiled a list of all the shrines in Kyoto and was methodi-

cally viewing them, three each morning and three after lunch. Every evening he would review his day's visits and tick them off the list. After a few days of this, I found him one afternoon sitting idly on his bunk. "No trips today?," I inquired. "*Nein*," he replied disconsolately, "*heute hab' ich templeschmerz*."

A Packrat's Paradise. The Shosoin at Nara was remarkable. Built more than twelve centuries ago, it was a wooden warehouse whose inventory had been frozen, like a time capsule. Nothing had been added since 800 AD, although the building itself had been continually updated by replacing its wooden beams, one by one, every few hundred years.

The treasures inside—Japanese bronzes, pots, textiles, statues, and wooden objects of every sort—rotated slowly through the Nara Museum, so in the course of fifty years or so one could see them all. For a compulsive packrat like myself, a storeroom like the Shosoin represented the ultimate long-range project.

A Bath in Atami

One of my goals in Japan was to stay at a *ryokan*, a traditional country inn. Today, I am told, these places have been spiffed up and are heavily touristed, but in 1960 they were still off the main track and considered somewhat humble.

There was a ryokan in the seaside resort of Atami that was also listed as a youth hostel. Through some act of government largesse, hostellers who came through the side door could enjoy the same accommodations as Japanese clients who came in the front, but for one-fifth the cost. That sounded fine to me.

Poached Travel Bum. The communal bath in the ryokan resembled a great tiled swimming pool. It was Olympic in size and practically boiling. I was issued a wooden stool, a tin bowl, a towel, and a bar of soap. The instructions were to sit on the stool, open one of the faucets in the wall, and wash myself squeaky-clean out of the tin bowl.



Washing the excess color out of newly dyed silk, in the back streets of Kyoto. Today we think of Japan as a model of industrialized modernity, but in 1960 much of its visible work owed more to the nineteenth century (or the twelfth) than to the twentieth.

Travel Bumming: The Far East



A bit of porno from the Mysterious East? This tableau was in the Tiger Balm Gardens in Hong Kong. I have no idea what's going on.

Once certifiably cleansed, I slid slowly into the pool, the steaming water poaching my body inch by inch. As the cares of the world drained away I sat there clad only in a placid smirk, as unstrung as a boiled banjo.

Whole Japanese families went through the same ritual. They lined up on the edge of the pool, washed themselves, and then entered the water according to rank. First they all bowed to Dad, who marched in fearlessly. The rest bowed to Mom, who slid in more demurely. The kids then entered one by one, starting with the oldest boy and ending with the youngest girl. It made great theater.

Room Service. That evening I was served dinner in my room. Back then I could still sit cross-legged on a *tatami* mat. A girl in a kimono, all smiles, sat across from me and fed me ten courses, practically bite by bite. Raw fish, eel, seaweed, whatever—everything was made extra delicious by her perfumed presence. After dinner she unrolled a sleeping mat on the floor, gave me a little sandbag for a pillow, and bowed backward out the sliding door. Alas! she left me just as I was beginning to wonder how far traditional Japanese room service might extend.

The entire cost for my night in the ryokan at Atami came to \$4.17.

The South China Sea

My two weeks of bumming in Japan turned me into a bold, albeit neophyte, traveler. The French colonial line, Messageries Maritimes, had a ship standing at the dock in Yokohama, bound for Saigon. So I went aboard and celebrated my birthday coasting down the South China Sea in the sweltering heat of late summer, drinking little schmoo-shaped bottles of Perrier with a French doctor who was headed for Laos. In the cool of the evenings we stood by the afterrail, enjoying the phosphorescent display in the ship's wake and talking politics.

Two Snapshots of Hong Kong. A two-day ship's stop in Hong Kong gave me just a taste of



An acupuncturist's sign in Macao, 1981. I was fascinated by the fist pointing to a right-to-left line that wraps to a left-to-right line above it.

that variegated city. Assuming the role of a serious traveler, I managed to pack a lot in—Victoria Peak, the Tiger Balm Garden, shark fin soup, the Star Ferry, a rickshaw ride, and the food markets in Aberdeen, where I spent an entertaining quarter-hour watching two women haggle over the price of a goose.

Twenty years later, I returned to give Hong Kong a better look. It was a lot busier and more expensive. The rickshaws had disappeared and everybody in the streets seemed to be selling wristwatches. But the Tiger Balm Garden was still there, just as fascinating as before.



The sheep is calling 911 to keep the rabbit from eloping with the rat. Or whatever. Another tableau from the Tiger Balm Garden.

The Tiger of Tiger Balm. Aw Boon Haw had been a canny Chinese merchant who made a fortune selling little round tins of ointment called Tiger Balm. In 1935 he devoted some of his money to building and maintaining a kind of theme park in Hong Kong, portraying stories from Buddhist and Taoist folklore. It consisted of some seven acres of grottoes and dioramas populated with statues of gods, kings, monsters, holy men, and talking animals. These gaudily colored figures were all engaged in complicated and often bizarre activities designed to stimulate the senses and uplift the soul.

I visited Aw Boon Haw's other garden in Singapore in 1968. It was equally gorgeous, though perhaps a bit less bizarre. When Haw built the Tiger Balm Gardens in Hong Kong and Singapore, there was nothing else like them on the planet. They anticipated Disneyland by twenty years.

Although he was noted for many philanthropies, you have to admire Haw for putting his money and his life into something unique, something he believed in. The

exertions of Gaudi and Rodia spring to mind. Haw's portrait was on display in the Hong Kong



Yet another dragon—a fountain in a public park in Guangzhou, 1981.



A new shop in Macao is open for business. The litter in the street consists mostly of the remains of hundreds of firecrackers.

garden; it showed a face of prosperous benevolence, with just a hint of pixiness about the mouth. Here was a man I could relate to.

Exorcising the Dead. My last night in Hong Kong I stumbled across the process of cleansing a sampan after a funeral. Elaborate paper demons were set alight and thrown into the water, while cymbals crashed and firecrackers snapped. The air reeked of gunpowder as the glint of burning dragons danced across the waters of Kowloon Bay. What a way to go!

Ephemeral Macao

From Hong Kong, in 1981, I climbed on a hydrofoil for a quick look at Macao. Although Macao was a Portuguese colony, it was said at the time that China could take it back with a single phone call. Why didn't they do so until 1999? One theory held that Chinese officials found the racy night life at the *Casino Lisboa* too useful.

I stayed in an old merchant's mansion that had been converted to a bed-and-breakfast. My



Kentucky fried chicken—or something like it—invades Red China. Guangzhou, 1981.

Travel Bumming: The Far East

room looked out on an inner courtyard, where the principal decoration was lines of laundry.

Although the famous casino seemed to be the center of Macao's social whirl, I found it somewhat tatty and depressing. Come to think of it, the whole town was a bit tatty. But what could you expect of a place that was one phone call away from extinction?

Guangzhou in Three Days

For years I longed to visit China—the real thing, not just Hong Kong—but was put off by the cost. You had to go through the Communist government's travel agency, which packed you onto tour buses and burdened you with pesky guides. It was not my kind of travel. But in 1981 I finally bit the bullet and forked out a couple of hundred dollars for an official three-day tour from Hong Kong to Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton) and back.

Supercharged People. China is one of those multilevel cultures, along with India, Mexico, and France, that reward deep study. The people

seemed to dress mostly the same—basic blue—but they were full of energy and individuality.

I spent an hour in a public park, trying to answer an avalanche of queries about America. Elsewhere in Asia you get a proportion of silly questions. For example, a teenage guy on a train in Pakistan once asked me, "Is it true that in America you can walk up to a woman on the street and order her to go to bed with you?" In China the questions were more serious.

Stumbling Technology. In contrast to the vibrancy of the Chinese people, the backwardness of Communist technology in 1981 was dismaying. The lower floors of the hotel where I was billeted were beginning to fall apart even as the top floors were still under construction. The tour group was taken to view a "showcase" electronics fabrication plant, a facility I was qualified to judge. It was shockingly second-rate. Even the bicycles in the streets seemed to be on their last wheels.

Pigging Out in Canton. My last night in China, the tour group was treated to a grand banquet of (count 'em) nineteen dishes. Forty



A bunch of kids hang out in the park in Guangzhou, 1981. Several of them spoke pretty good English and peppered me with intelligent questions. Throughout my travel bumming, the exotic behavior of Americans was a popular topic of inquiry.

Manila in Six Hours



Housing in Macao. It was a tenement or a typical residential block, depending on your point of view. 1981.

tourists oohed and aahed as the huge platters were presented, each more artfully arranged than the last. But the nineteenth offering was just a bowl of plain rice, which we were told not to touch. The guide explained that to partake of it would imply that the eighteen preceding courses had not been adequate. Authentic custom or not, it made a good story.

Even from a staged whirlwind tour, Guangzhou was worth seeing. Now that I can afford it, and travel in China is more like travel elsewhere, the country goes on my planning list for future trips.

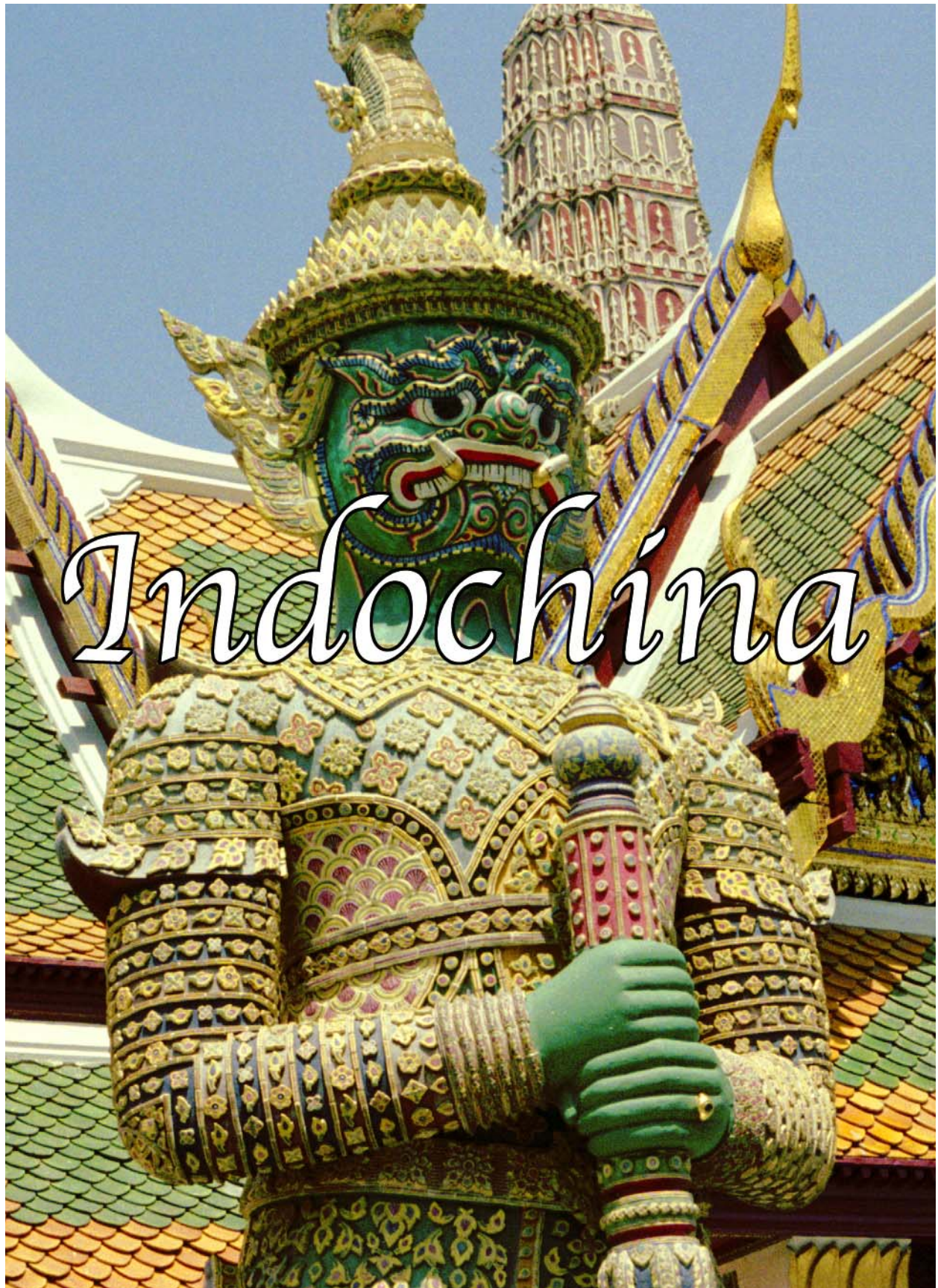
Manila in Six Hours

My impressions of Manila in 1960 were a blur, as the ship put in for only six hours to load cargo

and exchange passengers. But I did make it to the Manila Hotel, the favored haunt of Douglas MacArthur, and had a beer at the Jungle Bar. As for the rest of town, it seemed to be wet, decaying, and teeming with noisy jitneys. At that stage in my travels I had little experience of Asia for comparison. A month later Manila might have looked to me like Fat City.

🚲 *Life on a French colonial liner in 1960, even in third class, was idyllic. I drank wine with every meal and boned up on the language. I even struggled through a copy of *La Salaire de la Peur* from the ship's library. Only later, as I clawed my way across the interior of Asia by bus and train, did I realize that in the Far East I had been travel bumming in luxury.*

Travel Bumping: The Far East





A bas relief in the ruins of Angkor Wat (1960). Could the Khmers have died out because their feet were put on sideways?
Overleaf: A glorious demon guards a temple in Bangkok. His expression suggests that he may not be entirely happy with his job.



The king is on the march, with elephants and horses. Another relief from the extensive ruins of Angkor in Cambodia. 1960.

THE REALITY of traveling by land across Asia began to come home to me the morning of September 23, 1960, as the *S.S. Cambodge* nosed its way cautiously out of the South China Sea and up the Saigon River. My experience of Asia so far had encompassed big cities—Kyoto, Hong Kong, Manila—between which I had cruised in passenger-ship comfort. Now I was staring over the rail into a tangled green jungle, the easternmost edge of an 8,000-mile land mass that I had determined to cross.

Little wooden boats darted under the bows of the ship as the crowded Saigon docks came into view. Even before the gangplank went down, a swarm of touts, street sellers, money changers, and trishaw drivers converged on the pier, like flies on a picnic.

I suddenly realized that this was the big time. I had firm hold of my passport and about \$1,500, but I wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Peaceful Viet Nam

My first day in Saigon I got cheated by a money changer, whose fingers deftly glued themselves to a hundred-piastre note that I had thought was in my grasp. But I began to learn the tricks of land travel—bargaining, finding clean food,



This fresco from a temple in Thailand might personify my first impression of Asia, as I stepped off the boat at Saigon. But after a day or so I got my act together.



A movie theater in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1960. Indian films were very big there, although they seemed to all have the same plot.

warding off street vendors, getting accurate information, protecting my stuff.

And I discovered that people opened up when I sat down at a sidewalk food stall or climbed into a local bus. Although I was something of a Creature From Another World, I was at least approachable. Everybody wanted to try out their English, to find out where I came from and to ask what I was doing so far from home.

I stayed a couple of days in Saigon, sorting out my backpack and getting acclimated to the bumming life. Then I found the teeming Central Bus Terminal and headed inland, toward Cambodia.

The Art of Smuggling. The border between Viet Nam and Cambodia gave me my first glimpse of the interactions between officialdom and citizenry in Asia. It seemed like half the people on the bus were smuggling something, usually items buried deep in their baggy reed baskets.

At each of the multiple checkpoints, soldiers poked through the baskets and demanded money from the passengers. One feisty old dame talked back and had her load of bicycle spokes confiscated. But there seemed no element of morality or guilt in any of these transactions—just an unending game between men who had guns and ordinary people who were trying to make a living. I gained a new respect for the idea of “rule by law” by seeing what life was like without it.

Snakes in Cambodia

Phnom Penh, the capital of the Kingdom of Cambodia, seemed peaceful after the insistent hustle of Saigon. The Cambodians were like country cousins to the Vietnamese—easy-going instead of fretful, soft-spoken where the Viets were loud.

I fell in with a couple of American volunteers who worked for Medico, Tom Dooley’s medical aid station located up the Mekong at Kratie. They had come down to Phnom Penh to get some antivenin from the *Institut Pasteur*, which maintained a laboratory on a river island in the middle of the city. We hired a motorboat and putted out there.

Language

NASCENT TRAVEL BUMS often boggle at the prospect of language problems. When you get to the next country, where they speak Urdu (or any of the world’s 6,000 languages that aren’t English) how will you communicate? The newbie imagines sitting helplessly by the side of the road while natives point at him and gabble incomprehensibly.

Not to worry. You want to buy and they want to sell—that fact looms so large that the language factor becomes almost irrelevant. Business conquers all.

To begin with, most of the people that travel bums deal with—ticket sellers, hotel clerks, restaurateurs—know the English words that pertain to their jobs. Words like “bus,” “bed,” and “eat” will get you far. Then most countries in Asia and Africa are polyglot, which means that many local people have language problems too. Finally, most transactions are simple enough that you can conduct them by signing.

For example, to buy a bus ticket you point to your destination on a map, rub your fingers together to ask how much the ticket costs, and point to your watch to find out what time the bus leaves. Such behavior, which might be considered alarming in the US, is considered normal in Cameroon, whose inhabitants speak more than 100 mutually unintelligible languages. It’s the way business gets done.

It was easy to see why the *Institut Pasteur* was so isolated, for its primary stock in trade was baskets of venomous snakes. A technician would study an open basket for a few seconds, then dart in his hand and pull out a snake. Squeeze the head and the fangs popped into view. A quick wipe on the mouth of a glass tube milked out a few drops of venom. Then drop the snake into the “used” basket and go for a fresh one.

What a job! And how do you learn to do it in the first place?



A frieze of happy figures on top of a Hindu temple in Batu, Malaysia. The rotund one with the trunk is Ganesha, the god of money.

Lazing in the Gulf of Siam

Gentled by the easy life in Phnom Penh, I decided to treat myself to a shore vacation. Kep was a renowned sea resort on the Gulf of Siam, just a few hours southward by bus via Kampot. The warm sea breezes beckoned.

The only other Westerner on the bus was Sister Elizabeth, a crusty French nun. Because all the Cambodian passengers were heading eastward, to Kompong Trach, the bus deposited us at a place called Damnak Chang Oe, several miles from Kep, and proceeded on its rattling, jouncy, fummy way.

Roundly excommunicating all Cambodian buses and their drivers in colonial French, Sister Elizabeth found us a three-wheel moto-taxi. Her sleeves flapping in the wind like the wings of a great black bird, she and I flew into Kep *tête-à-tête*, wedged into the moto's sidecar. She got out at her convent, up the hill, and I bounced down to the village.

A Colonial Paradise. The Hotel Azure in Kep still preserved its colonial ambience. Next to the obligatory portrait of Prince Sihanouk on the lobby wall was a framed lithograph of Chartres, and the wicker table on the verandah carried year-old copies of *Paris Match*. And yes, the hall



The back streets of Bangkok were canals, where the action was and on which most of the life and traffic of the city depended. 1960.

porter asked discreetly if *monsieur* desired the company of a *jolie femme* for the evening. However, the dinner menu had gone native; it was written in the cursive squiggles of the Khmer script, with only a few French clues penciled in.

I spent the day paddling about in the lazy waters of the Gulf of Siam and later that evening enjoyed a dinner of steak and wine, my first such meal since quitting the *Cambodge* in Saigon. It was all amazingly cheap.

As I was dozing on the sand that afternoon, Sister Elizabeth came down the hill at the head of a procession of little Cambodian girls, two by two, neatly fitted out in blue uniforms. They trooped to the deserted end of the beach and sat on the rocks, observing the waves and the setting sun. After exactly half an hour, the little platoon reformed and marched back up the hill to the convent, carefully circumventing the fleshpots of the Hotel Azure.

That night I was awakened by a monstrous rat scuttling about my room (in the middle of the night all such visitations seem monstrous). I found the rat's hole and sealed it up with a glass ashtray. The last thing I recall before drifting back to sleep was the gentle purr of waves lapping on the beach, punctuated by the scritch of rat's teeth against glass.

Filled With Angkor

The number one attraction in Cambodia was Angkor Wat. Its local village was Siem Reap, a full day by bus from Phnom Penh. On the way we stopped at a place called Spean Thnot, where a little Spean Thnotian girl shoved in my face a wicker tray of deep-fried spiders. They were huge and very leggy. Somewhere you have to draw the line on local food, and at that moment I instinctively drew it.

Angkor was huge and amazing. Intricately detailed friezes supported solemn stone faces, all interlaced by the jungle roots that grew inexorably through every crevice. I spent two days climbing through the Wat, the Thom, the Bayon,



I have no idea who this happy gentleman was, but he was obviously worth a photo. I loved the dragon's-head belt buckle. Bangkok, 1960.

and so on, without seeing more than half of it. I also became a fan of pedicabs, although a German travel bum there argued passionately to me that it was immoral for one man to be wheeled about by the exertions of another.

Beginning of the End. Although my journey through Viet Nam and Cambodia that fall of 1960 was peaceful, the days when you could cross these countries quietly by bus were rapidly coming to an end. The French had been gone five years; Laos, to the north, was already dangerous; the *USNS Breton* was unloading American military supplies in Saigon; and in Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk had been demoted to a figurehead. The writing was on the wall, for those who had the sense to read it.



The main railway station in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was more than just an architectural triumph. Within the attached hotel, on Sundays, was served a fabulously sumptuous *rijstafel*, the classic Dutch-inspired spread of a hundred or so Indonesian dishes.

Walking to Thailand

The border crossing from Cambodia to Thailand had already degenerated into a no-man's land. The soldiers at the customs post at Poipet, Cambodia, simply pointed me in a westward direction and said good-bye. I hitched up my backpack and slogged five miles alone, through deserted rice paddies, to the customs post at Aranyaprathet, Thailand. Had I broken a leg, I would presumably have remained there in foot-deep mud, stuck between Cambodia and Thailand, until the Viet Nam war started.

In Aranyaprathet, however, the motherly proprietress of the Railway Hotel took me in, arranged a hot shower, and put me on the train to Bangkok.

Bangkok on the Bounce. After the rural life in Cambodia, Bangkok seemed big and noisy. I rode the funny little yellow streetcars around town, loaded up on noodle soup, and got my visa for Burma. Then I took the train out of town, northward. I wanted to visit the ancient city of Ayudhya, also known as *Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm Rajwaramahaviharn*. (Try saying that with your mouth full of noodle

soup.) A former capital of Siam, it was famous for its reclining Buddha.

Buddha Recumbent. The Buddha was magnificent, but it was covered by a modern steel building, preventing you from getting any perspective. Sort of like trying to view a whale stuffed inside a garage. It was surrounded by crumbling brick pagodas, interesting but seedy, the relics of long-gone grandeur.

So I got back on the train and rode 400 miles farther north to Chiang Mai, in the center of the opium-growing highlands of northern Thailand. In 1960 the dope trade was benign and mostly invisible; Chiang Mai was just a lazy hill town, dotted with pagodas. Nearby, troops of elephants worked the local teak forests.

Chiang Mai Medicine

Friends in Berkeley had given me an introduction to an American anthropologist who was studying "injection doctors" in Chiang Mai. These folk were local herbalists who harvested cast-off hypodermics from Western clinics and went from village to village treating the sick. The treatments involved injecting various home-made brews, often causing severe reactions, but

Life Among the Ferengis

their bedside manners made injection doctoring a runaway success.

Here was a stark cultural contrast. For us, what these men were doing was unscientific baloney, and dangerous to boot. We understood the true causes of disease, which were tiny critters you could see only with a microscope. But for the injection doctors' patients, our talk about microbes was hardly more than a pleasant story. "Little bugs in the blood? You have to look through a brass tube to see them? How quaint! My cousin once saw a demon in his rice bowl..." Something like that was their typical reaction.

When you went to a Western clinic, the doctors simply grabbed you and stuck a needle in your arm. No talk-talk, no courtesy to the gods. The injection doctor, on the other hand, gave you a treatment you could understand. He talked to your illness, aligned your body with the prevailing forces and spirits, and conjured your pain to depart. Finally, as a climax, he stabbed you with the same needle the Western doctors used. It just had to work better.

Helping Lepers. During my stay in Chiang Mai I went out to the McKean Hospital, which served the one percent of the local population who had leprosy. The volunteers at the hospital, as selfless a bunch of Europeans as you could find, were *de facto* social workers as well as doctors, because many of the lepers' problems were sociological.

When a villager showed the signs, he was usually abandoned by his family and driven out into the jungle. So the first step was to find the patient and talk him in. The next step involved some rough-and-ready cosmetic surgery, to restore the patient's self-esteem. Then the long treatment with antibiotics could begin.

The lepers lived in little huts, and some of them made wood carvings to help

support the hospital. For as little as \$300 (in 1960) you could endow a hut and see your name over the door. I suppose today this humanitarian effort has been overshadowed by the fight against AIDS.

Old Demon Cilantro. My travel bumming, living off the land, had given me the metaphorical cast-iron stomach. But in Chiang Mai the odds caught up with me—I got barfy sick from a bowl of soup. It was flavored with cilantro; and although that herb was an innocent bystander, since then I have never been able to stand its odor.

Life Among the Ferengis

In January, 1981, I returned to Indochina, this time with Martha Johnson. By then war had come and gone, but the people hadn't changed much. We trekked the length of Malaysia, from Singapore to Bangkok, with a stop-off at Penang.

Yet Another POTO. Called the "Pearl of the Orient" (along with Hong Kong, Shanghai, the Philippines and who-knows-where else), Penang is a small island off the west coast of the Malay peninsula. Martha and I reached it by leaving the train at Butterworth and taking a crowded ferry.



Several residents of the McKean Leper Colony supported themselves by turning out nicely carved teak animals for the tourist trade. Although his hands were knotted by the disease, this man handled his tools with expert skill. 1960.

Travel Bumming: Indochina

Penang was famous primarily for rubber and pirates, but it also had a reputation for its fine beaches. In 1981, with Indochina still reeling from the dustup in Viet Nam, there was not a lot of tourism. Most tourist activity, along with a few hippie colonies, was centered around *Batu Ferengi*, the “foreigner’s beach.”

We put up at the Lone Pine Motel, a cheap and delightful hostelry located smack dab on the beach. At dinner time, barefooted waiters planted tables at the water’s edge, so you could dine with a modicum of elegance while watching the sun set over the Strait of Malacca. Except for the occasional bug the size of a ping-pong ball, it was all very romantic.

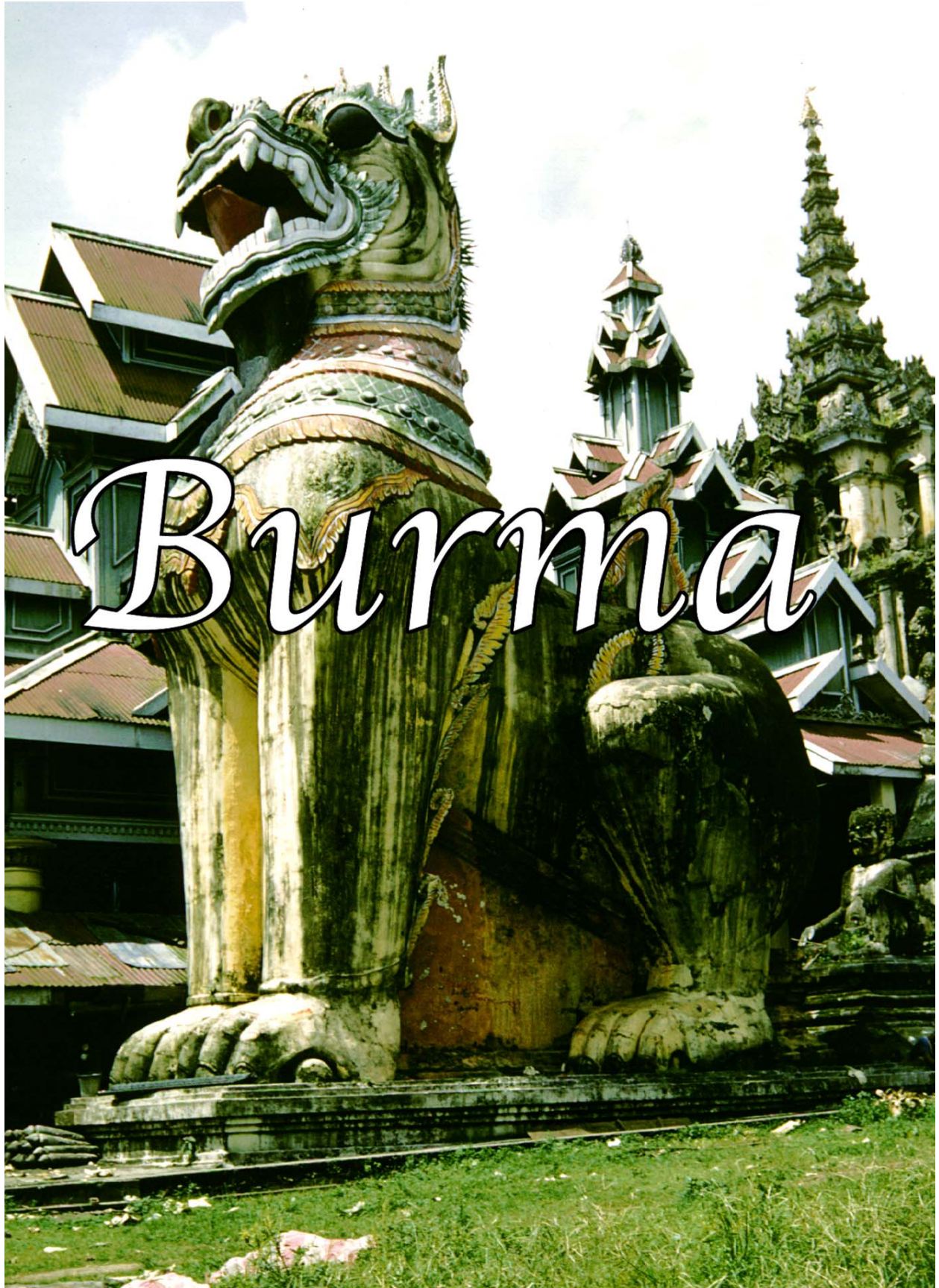
About the term *ferengi*. Concocted by eliding “French” and “English,” this pidgin word for Westerners was common throughout Asia long

before Star Trek seized on it. In the Middle East, I often heard myself called a *ferengi* from *Ferengistan*, that mysterious “other” land from which silly travel bums emerged.

🚲 *At the time of my first trek across Asia, in 1960, Burma was still fairly wild. So I compromised my “land only” promise and took a plane from Bangkok to Rangoon. This carried me away from ground travel and into tourist-land. The difference came alive to me during the bus ride to Don Muang airport, north of Bangkok. As we roared past the temples and rice paddies of rural Thailand, a chirpy tour guide led everybody in chorus after chorus of “Old MacDonald’s Farm.” This struck me as a quintessentially American moment.*



Much of Indochina is built on water. This Thai boy was probably as comfortable in a boat as an American boy is on a bicycle. Whether he was going to catch any fish in that murky water was another matter. 1960.



Travel Bumming: Burma



The Sule Pagoda in downtown Rangoon. 1960.

Overleaf: A temple guardian at the Schwedagon Pagoda outside Rangoon. Nice doggy.



Inside the Schwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon. Buddhist views on material attachment do not preclude the plentiful use of gold. 1960.

BURMA HAD A ROUGH TIME of it during the second World War, and gaining independence in 1948 didn't help. The first time I went there, in 1960, much of the country was dominated by local warlords. The second time, in 1981, a socialist dictatorship was in charge but the economy had tanked. Nevertheless, I found the Burmese people and culture to be among the most fascinating in Asia.

Living It Up in Rangoon

Rangoon is a city unlike any other, a blend of gold-encrusted temples, crumbling colonial monuments, noisy bazaars, and Buddhist monks sporting red umbrellas.

A Banquet at the YMCA. During my first stay, in October, 1960, I was the only westerner at the Rangoon YMCA. Every morning my Burmese roommate washed, wrapped a clean white *dhoti* around his legs, picked up his briefcase, and went to the office. The day I left, he invited a dozen friends to a farewell banquet. The menu consisted of several delicious but

utterly mysterious pasty substances served on banana leaves. We sat cross-legged on the floor and ate with our fingers.



Googly eyes stare out from a 12th-century temple at Pagan.

The Presidential Suite at the Strand. On a later and more well-heeled visit to Burma (1981), I put up at the Strand Hotel. The Presidential Suite featured servant's quarters and a balcony overlooking the street, from which you could wave to the common people. The suite cost \$18 a night; for another four bucks I bought a lobster dinner in the grand dining room.

This apparently was the last gasp of the old Strand; in 1993 it was gentrified by a Japanese hotel conglomerate and they now ask \$300 a night for a room.

Among its appointments, the suite was furnished with a crystal carafe of "purified drinking water." I happened to stumble upon the purification process being performed in the



A tailor's signboard on a street in Rangoon. After a month in Asia my own wardrobe was somewhat incoherent, but I didn't advertise the fact. 1960.

Grand Old Hotels

BACK IN VICTORIAN DAYS, when travel was really travel, great hotels were constructed in the hinterlands of Asia and Africa. They stood as oases for the weary traveler, who might be coming off a fortnight at sea or a week on horseback. The grand old hotels superbly delivered a measure of urban civility in the back of the beyond.

As late as the 1960s, a number of these places still existed in something like their original state. The Strand in Rangoon was one; so were the Grand Pacific Hotel in Suva and the Winter Palace in Luxor. As of this writing the Strand has been upgraded and the Winter Palace still soldiers on, but the Grand Pacific has become a derelict.

When I could afford it, I stayed in these hotels. I loved the huge ornate lobbies, the rooms with mosquito netting and ceiling fans, and the massive bathtubs. At dinner your superannuated waiter would serve a soup course *and* a fish course; the Spode might be cracked and the plating worn from the silverware, but all the flourishes were there. At the end of dinner the waiter might ask if you cared to retire to the smoking room for a cigar. No way I would want to do such a revolting thing, but it felt great to be asked.

corridor: the bellman was ladling water from a bucket through a fishnet to strain the impurities out of it. Indeed, it worked—the water in the carafe contained no fish.

Tricks with Currency. One reason why prices in Burma were so low in 1981 had to do with money exchange. The bank in Rangoon gave you about 7 *kyats* to the dollar, but on the black market you could get 40 or more. The most lucrative exchange involved whiskey and cigarettes, both of which were taxed nearly to extinction. So I stocked up at the duty-free shop on my way out of Thailand, buying my legal limit of Johnnie Walker Black Label and Players 505s. In the taxi from the Rangoon airport, I placed my duty-free bag prominently on the front seat and negotiated with the driver. At the end of the ride

The Train to Pegu

he kept the goodies and gave me a wad of kyats sufficient to cover my living expenses in Burma for seven days.

The Train to Pegu

After a few days exploring the esoteric delights of the Rangoon of 1960, I took a day trip by train to Pegu, 80 km away, there to view yet another Reclining Buddha.

The Money Game

WHETHER YOU'RE A TRAVEL BUM OR a well-heeled tourist, when you're in somebody else's country you had to deal with their money. The trick, for the travel bum, is to make every franc, dinar, or zloty count.

In the 1960s, most countries in Asia and Africa had "soft" money—it really wasn't worth what their governments made you pay for it. The difference always led to a dilemma: take your dollar to the bank and get 7 thingies for it, or take it to the marketplace, where you could get 40?

But buying cash inside a country had its risks. You never knew whether the police would find out and get shirty, and there was always the chance that the smiling dealer in front of you was setting you up. A better policy was to buy money outside the country and carry it in. That was also illegal, but your worst risk was having a customs officer confiscate it. Hiding bills between the pages of a travel book always worked for me.

Beirut was one of the world's prime places to buy money. In January, 1961, I spent an afternoon in the street of the money shops, bargaining up a storm. Each moneychanger could see me leaving his competitor's place, so the deals got better and better. By the end of the day I had spent \$150 on Egyptian pounds, Turkish lire, and Yugoslavian dinars. It was enough cheap cash to carry me as far as Italy, which was the point where I left off money gaming. Western Europe, at last, was a land where money was real and banks were your friend.



The village dentist hangs out his shingle. Pagan, Burma, 1981.

My theory is that the ancient carvers of giant Buddhas, outdoing one another for size, discovered that mounting a large statue upright is a tricky business. So they finessed the engineering problems by popularizing the recumbent pose, which can easily be carved in place to practically any scale.

That short trip to Pegu introduced me to the joys of Third World railways. The train started an hour late, it broke down, the carriage was overcrowded, and it smelled. In short, I loved it. The whole range of humanity, from beggars to bankers, was at your elbow (and sometimes in your lap). Anyone who spoke a European language spontaneously tried it out on you. It was like a town meeting on wheels, with a travel film out the window thrown in for free. From that day on, I opted for rail travel in Asia and Africa wherever trains ran.

Pagan Sights

Ever since the end of the Raj, tourist travel inside Burma had been chancy. In 1960, moving upriver from Rangoon involved such a mess of police permits—and tickets on boats that might or might not leave the dock—that I gave up the idea.

In 1981 the Burma Airways office beckoned seductively just a few doors from the Strand



The plain of Pagan is strewn with intricately carved temples like this one, dating to the thirteenth century. 1981.



Buddha's golden feet stuck out in the cold, as if he were sleeping with a short blanket. The rest of the reclining statue at Pegu was stuffed inside a metal shed. 1960.

Hotel. It sold air tickets to Pagan, Mandalay, and Mitkyina; but actually getting a flight could involve days of begging for a seat, rushing to the airport when one was offered, and then discovering that the plane wasn't flying that day.

Nevertheless I made a concerted effort and finally scored a 90-minute flight northward to Pagan. It was worth it, for Pagan turned out to be one of the most remarkable destinations in Southeast Asia.

Temple-O-Rama. The ancient ruins and present-day village of Pagan cover a broad plain beside the Irrawady river southwest of Mandalay. In the 12th and 13th centuries some 2,000 temples and pagodas were constructed, many of them intricately carved from gleaming white stone. In 1981, standard transport from temple to temple was by horse cart at a dollar an hour.

Each complex rested on its own platform, giving you a panoramic view of the hundreds of

other temples that dotted the landscape to the horizon. In late afternoon the air grew still; from your lofty perch you could watch the sun set over the distant river and hear the tinkling of prayer bells in the monasteries down below. It was a travel-brochure experience.

Traveling Krauts. There was a tourist hotel on the outskirts of town, but I opted for a homier lodge in the center. It was built entirely of bamboo stems and reed mats, so the sound of everybody's doings was shared like one big family. Unfortunately the family included a group of drunken German party animals who sang *trinkenlieder* until three in the morning. It was with great fortitude that I restrained myself from trying to re-enact the fire-bombing of Dresden on their heads.

The Train Option. It would have taken more energy than I could muster to wangle a return flight for the 700 km from Pagan to Rangoon. The alternative was to take a jeep at five in the

Travel Bumming: Burma

morning to Thazi, 100 km away, which boasted a train station on the main line. My trip to Pegu had convinced me that Burma Railways was a more satisfying and reliable source of transport than Burma Airways, so the choice was a no-brainer.

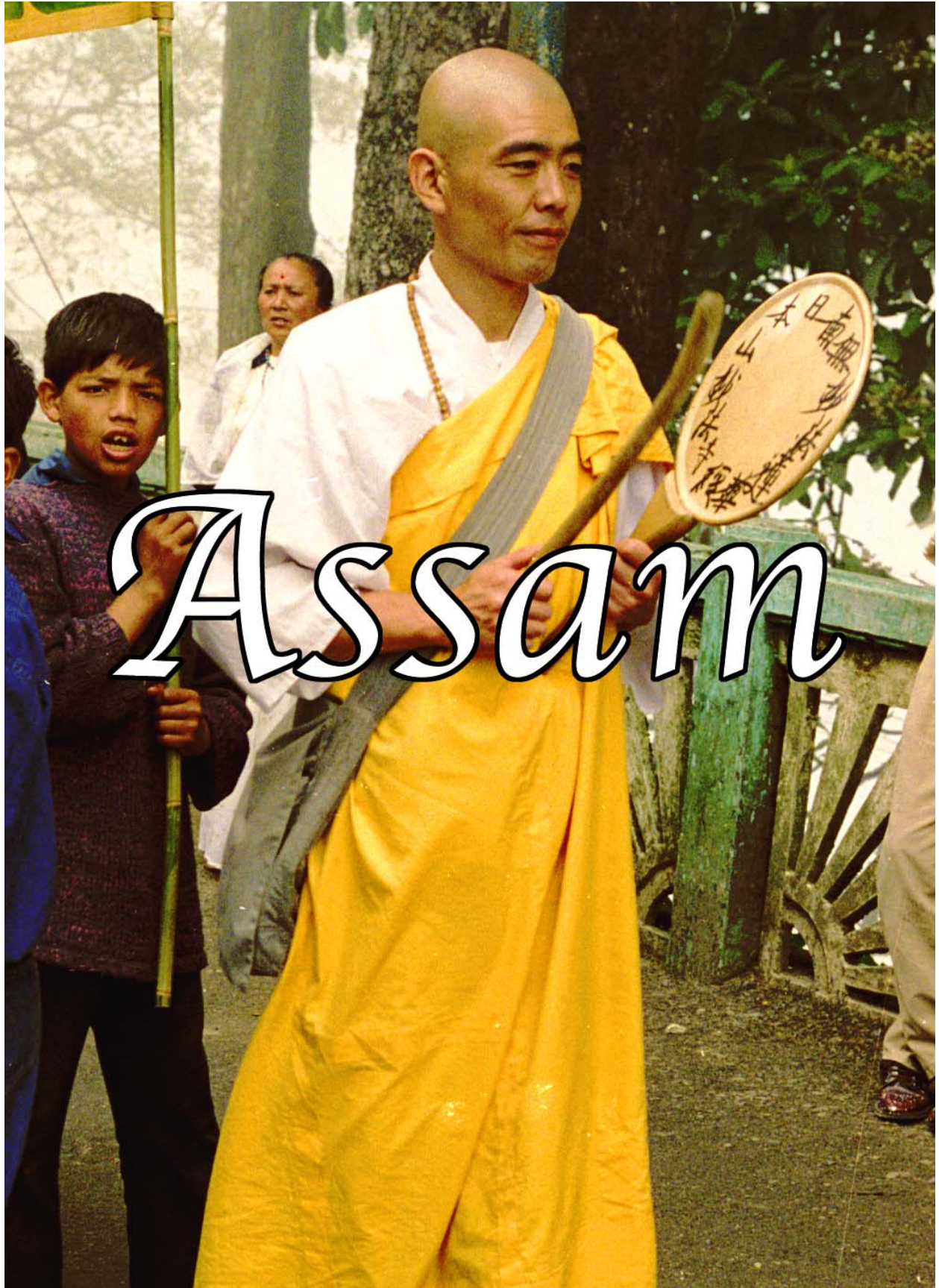
The Germans left Pagan by the same route and then reinforced their loutishness of the previous night by sleeping in the aisle of the train so nobody could move around. But the stops along the way, as we chugged southward through the Sittang River valley, presented an absorbing microcosm of life in Burma. I bought my fill of exotic fruits and chicken-on-a-stick out

of the carriage windows, while admiring the business tactics of the vendors, as tough a bunch of businesswomen as I've ever seen.

🚲 *The borderlands between Burma and India never really settled down after the Second World War, so in 1960 there was no safe land transport west of Rangoon. I booked the shortest airplane flight I could find, from Rangoon to Akyab, and went on by bus to Chittagong in Bangladesh, which at that time was called East Pakistan.*

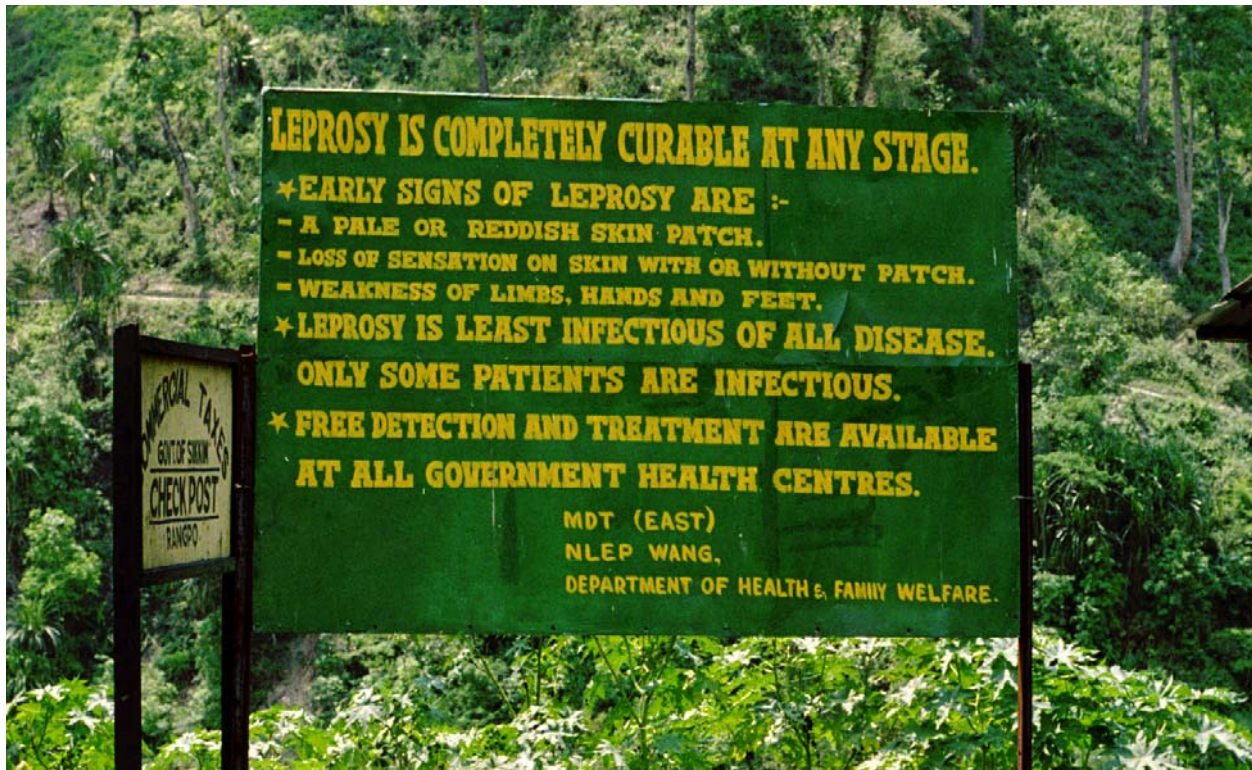


The early morning train from Thazi to Rangoon. Water vendors clustered hopefully around the Westerners in the first class carriage, but it could be all your life was worth to drink their product. Bananas were a safer bet. 1981.





Monks and monk-wannabes at the Rumtek Monastery, high in the Sikkim hills opposite Gangtok. 1997.
Overleaf: A monk in Darjeeling beats a lusty rhythm to celebrate Buddha's birthday.



As I crossed into Sikkim in 1997, a friendly sign at the Rangpo border post reminded me of one of the possible hazards of travel bumming. The incidence of leprosy has actually dropped dramatically since then and the disease is well on its way to eradication.

FROM CHITTAGONG IN BANGLADESH I took a series of trains through Dakha into the eastern outposts of India. Thus I entered India for the first time in the Himalayan state of Assam. I crossed the border quietly on foot, at the customs post in the Khasi hills between Sylhet and Shillong, and it was more than a week before I descended to the steamy clamor of Calcutta, considered by many to be the “real” India.

Going for the Tea. My first visit to Assam, in 1960, was inspired primarily by the tea. I wanted to see it being grown and taste it in its native habitat. As I worked my way northward from the humid floodlands of Bangladesh into the foothills of the Himalayas, I encountered towns with magical names—Gauhati, Bijni, Cooch Behar. It was October, oranges were in season, and the air was crisp and cool. At last I arrived at Siliguri and mounted a little 3-foot-gage train that made the final ascent up the mountain to Darjeeling.

Toonerville in the Himalayas. The railway was a remarkable engineering feat. A toy engine chugged away, hauling three cars, while a boy on the roof broke up lumps of coal to feed into its firebox. It turned corners by looping over its



This engaging little bronze dog stood guard outside a Buddhist monastery in the Assam hills. 1960.

own track, zigzagged backwards and forwards up the slope, and at one point veered out over a wooden platform to get around a particularly sharp corner.

From the window you could look down thousands of feet into the Brahmaputra river valley. As Darjeeling came into view you could look up to the snowy crest of Kanchenjunga, three miles high, beetling over the town.

Tea in Darjeeling

The town of Darjeeling was sort of poured over a hillside, so you spent a lot of time climbing up and down its streets. The influence of the nearby Himalayan kingdoms—Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan—was present everywhere, in the people and the shops. The town had an other-worldly air.

There Will Always Be an England. I put up at Mrs Shaw's "Stuart House," something of an institution for overland travelers. She provided hearty English breakfasts and served proper tea at the correct hour. In Darjeeling she had spent her life and there she would stay, the new India notwithstanding.

The premiere restaurant in town was Glen-nary's, which inspired in Mrs Shaw starchy comments about her Indian compatriots: "They

Chai

FOR SOME REASON I grew up drinking tea, not coffee. Perhaps it was because I spent three months in London when I was 17, a critical imprinting age for one's lifelong beverage. Or maybe it was because my parents drank tea. At any rate, a preference for tea confers several benefits on the travel bum. First, it has the same name in every Asian language—*chai*. This means you can order tea from the scruffiest *wallah* on the street and know you'll be understood. Second, it is usually safe because it has been simmering over a fire, sometimes for hours. You can even lace it with hot milk.

Finally, *chai* is cheap. In the 1960s you could lean out the train window at any major station in India and buy tea, hot and fresh, in an unglazed pottery cup. When you finished, you smashed the cup against the side of the train to keep it from being reused. The cup, hand-fired in a nearby village, was cheaper than factory-made paper or plastic. It and the *chai* and the window service all came to one *anna*, less than two cents US. And it was always delicious, because the Indians knew their tea.



Toting the business end of a Tibetan trumpet seems to have been a big drag for this kid. Darjeeling, 1997.

Tea in Darjeeling



Diane, just turned eleven and a budding travel bum herself, takes a spin at the Rumtek prayer wheels. 1997.

think that because of Independence they can go into Glennary's like anyone else, but of course they don't know how to behave." For Mrs Shaw, the present was iffy at best and the future was always on probation.

At Glennary's you could sit in oak-paneled splendor and wash down Yorkshire pudding with a Pimm's Cup Number 2. Well-furnished bars in Asia used to stock all six of the Pimm's Cups—gin-based, whisky, brandy, rum, vodka, and tequila. Each was a smooth cocktail pre-mixed in London and bottled for the colonies. The idea was to protect you from the vagaries of native bartenders; whether you ordered your Pimm's Cup in Capetown or Calcutta it would always be the same, and you could ask for it just by number. Alas! Except for the odd bottle of Number 1, these excellent concoctions are now unobtainable.

Dancing with Kali. Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, burst loose on October 19. Houses sparkled with candles, electric lights hung everywhere, and the air was charged with a holiday mood. In the streets there were wild processions, the Kali pujas, featuring grotesque statues smeared with blood. As a goddess, Kali is something else—sort of a wicked witch whose hobby is performing the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Watching her devotees in action gave

me a whole new insight into the spiritual life of India.

Tiger Hill. On a lighter note, I rose up in the middle of the night to catch a Jeep ride to the top of Tiger Hill, there to watch the celebrated



O, the joys of local cuisine! This fast-food place in Darjeeling's main square offered the usual assortment of mysterious food.

Travel Bumping: Assam



Kids on their way to school in the hills near Darjeeling. Primary education is taken very seriously in the Indian subcontinent. 1997.

Climbing to Sikkim

sunrise. It was chilly and the air was still, as a small group of us waited in the darkness before dawn. Then sure enough, across the vast river valley far below, the sun came up crisply and gloriously about 200 miles away, fired like a golden cannonball from the other side of India. It was breathtaking.

A Tea Garden. I finally accomplished my goal in Darjeeling by visiting the Lopchu Tea Garden, where it turned out that an Indian film company was working. The Elvis of the day—a star named Devananda—was cavorting in and out of the tea bushes with a string of demurely dressed starlets. It was the ultimate in dramatic fluff. And yes, I consumed my fill of Darjeeling tea. Then and now, it is, in my opinion, as good as tea gets.

Thirty-seven years later I returned to Darjeeling, this time with Dany, my daughter Diane, and our French friend Jacqueline. Diane celebrated her eleventh birthday in the hotel dining room. Darjeeling seemed larger, more

cosmopolitan, and filled with Indian tourists. The practical little railroad that took me there in 1960 had become a museum piece, and Glenary's was no longer the number one restaurant. Mrs Shaw was gone, as was Stuart House.

Climbing to Sikkim

My family visit to Assam in 1997 coincided with Buddha's birthday—a nice counterweight to Diwali and the Kali blood rituals—so the monks were out in force.

A procession formed up in the center of Darjeeling, with saffron-robed marchers in orange hats playing a miniature orchestra of trumpets and gongs. Those at the head of the line carried five-tiered monastery banners. Through all the colorful religious display, the monks sported the latest models of wristwatches and dark glasses. It was all very Nationally Geographical.

Monastery-Crawling. Dany and I negotiated a permit to travel to the great Rumtek monastery



The Rumtek monastery sprawled over a mountainside in hilly Sikkim. Getting there required a jeep ride followed by a stiff climb. 1997.

Travel Bumming: Assam

in Sikkim. The monastery was perched on a hill across the valley from Gangtok, with expansive views of the mountains. As we struggled up the final climb, we could hear the monks blowing their ten-foot-long Tibetan horns. Diane analyzed the sound and wondered out loud what they might have been eating for lunch.

Rumtek was large and well-maintained, with a fine collection of prayer wheels. Each turn of a wheel is equivalent to saying the prayer written on it—a form of automated worship that far predates the Catholic rosary. We spun ourselves a goodly supply of blessedness.

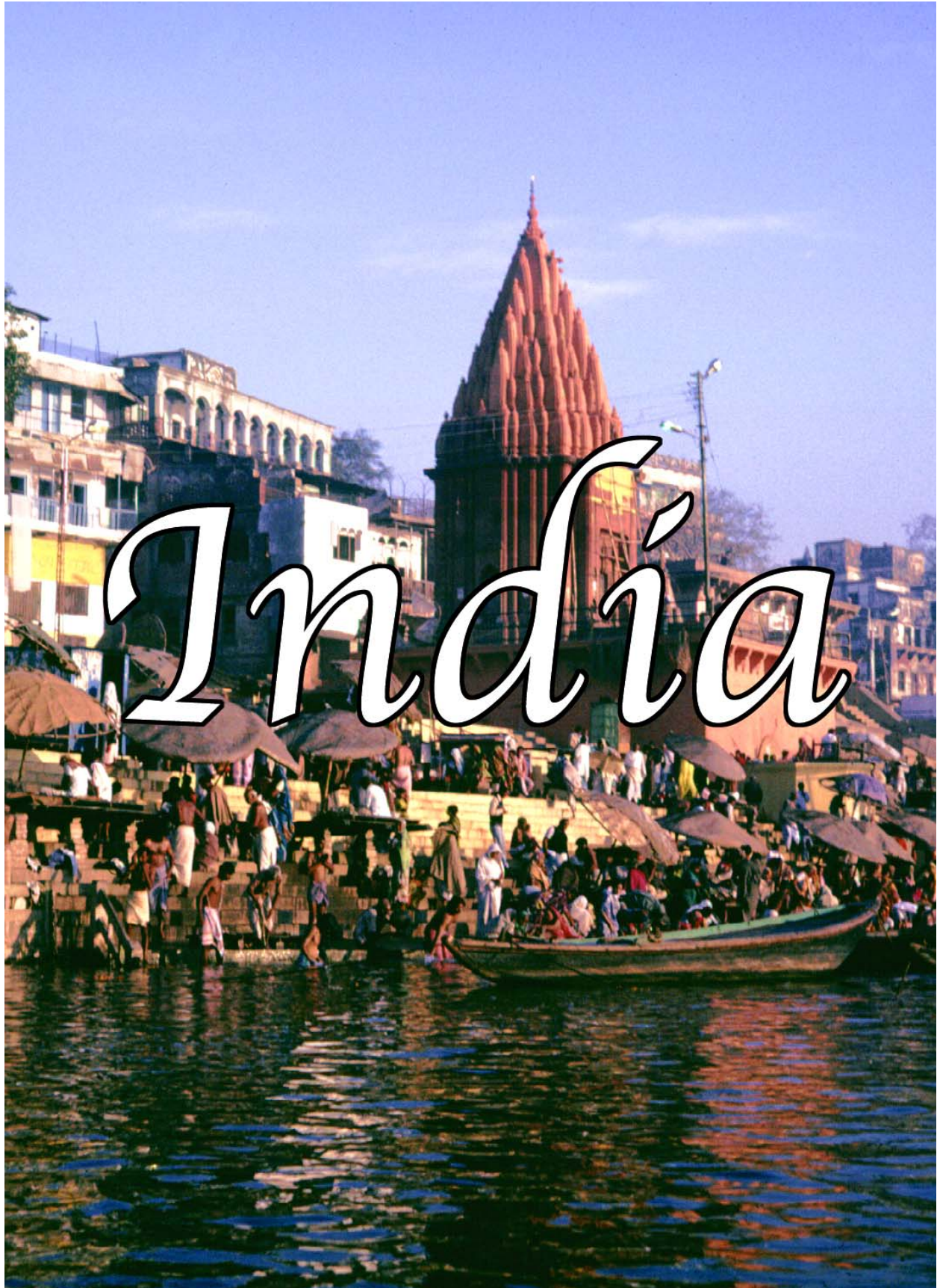
Trying to Go Home Again. We also visited another tea garden, and this time I got a chance to see the processing machinery. It was vintage Victorian—made between 1830 and 1880—a symphony of cast-iron levers, spoked wheels, oil cups and leather belts, all maintained with exquisite care.

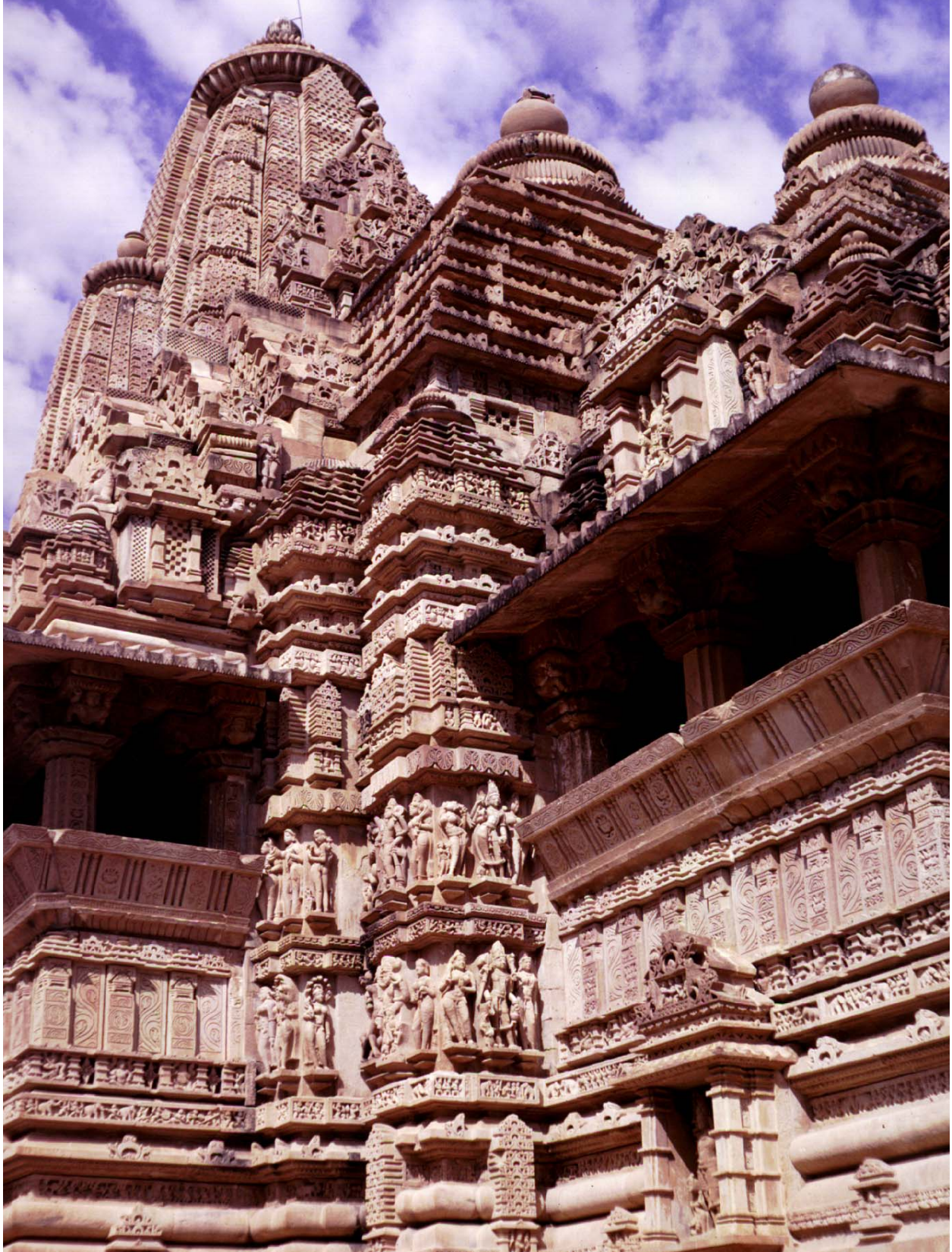
I extolled the Tiger Hill experience to my family, so we went up there at 4 am with an immense crowd of Indian tourists. We took shelter from the mountain cold in a new concrete observatory at the top. But it was foggy and crowded and the magic wasn't there. The sunrise looked like just a sunrise. Tom Wolfe was right—I couldn't go home again, even though Assam was hardly home.

🚲 *My bus ride in 1960, down the mountain from Darjeeling toward Calcutta, was memorable. The road was steep and tortuous, the weather was misty, the bus was a heap of junk. The engine boiled, the transmission clanked, the headlights flickered, and the brakes smoked. We hurtled from precipice to precipice, the driver all the time muttering supplications to a flower-draped statuette on the dashboard, whose eight arms seemed unlikely to do us any good in an emergency. While clinging to the window post I pondered the classic line from an old Charlie Chan movie: "Life is cheap in the East."*



Parading a pot of flowers on Buddha's birthday. Darjeeling, 1997.





This temple at Khajuraho has been decorated within an inch of its life. Some of the carvings are pornographic (see page 59). 1987.
Overleaf: The bathing ghats at Benares, on the Ganges river. Hindus flock to the river at sunrise to bathe and pray. 1960.

Capitalism in Calcutta



Calcutta is one of the last places on earth where the traditional rickshaw puller can find employment. 1992.

SOME COUNTRIES contain such a banquet of varied lifestyles that you can go back to them again and again, finding new experiences each time. America is one such place, as are France and Italy. But perhaps the premier example is India. Its climate ranges from the swamps of Bengal to the deserts of Rajasthan, and its population varies from sophisticated techies in Bangalore to abject beggars in Calcutta. Everything is there, if you take the trouble to look for it. I traveled extensively in India six times—in 1960, '68, '77, '81, '92, and '97—and each visit opened my eyes a bit more.

Capitalism in Calcutta

As late as 1960, people routinely died of hunger on the streets of Calcutta. Here was moral tension in its rawest form. A man lies under a sheet of newspaper, in the last throes of starvation. Before dawn a cart will take away his corpse. People walk around him, averting their eyes. But the loose change in your pocket could save his life, at least for a while. If you gave

those few coins to the hotel across the street, they would carry him inside and revive him with soup and rice. In fact you do nothing. Where would you start? How could you make a lasting difference? Nevertheless you make a choice, at least implicitly, and it haunts you afterwards. I still think of it today, 40 years later.



In 1997, my family and I paid a visit to Mother Teresa at her place in Calcutta. She had just left for Rome the day before. It was one of the last trips she made.

Professional Beggars

VISITING THE THIRD WORLD for the first time, many tourists bring back tales of being accosted by beggars. The withered hand plucking your sleeve, the plaintive cry of “*Babu, babu*,” the universal gesture of pointing to an empty mouth—these images hit you where you live.

What do you do? If you were to stagger around with a duffel bag full of coins and candies it would soon give out, and you might start a riot to boot. Many travel bums settle on a policy of paying *baksheesh* skimpily, if at all, and only for services rendered. It’s a kind of tough love.

The young cripples are the worst. While some may have suffered a disease or accident, most seem to confirm the stories of parents twisting legs around to make their kids into effective beggars. When these monstrosities hop into the train, you feel like giving them enough money so they can go home and shoot the people who messed them over. But if their only alternative was starvation, who are you to judge? I’d love to hear someone come up with a resolution to this dilemma.

Pots of Goat’s Blood. Morning goat sacrifices took place at the Kali temple down by the river. The goats stared glassy-eyed as their brothers had their throats slit, one by one. Hindu women hoping for male children slathered the blood over stone phalluses, which were planted here and there in the temple compound like obscene mushrooms.

The goat’s blood was passed around in attractive little brass pots. I bought several and mailed them to my mother. She wrote back thanking me for the tea cups, which she had put in service at the next meeting of her watercolor class. I never told her what they really were.

The Writers Building. Coming into India for the first time, in 1960, I had not yet twigged to the fact that Indian hotels existed at every price level and every degree of comfort. You may snicker, but having experienced Japanese youth hostels I assumed that the same sort of accommodations might be found in India. The official youth hostel handbook mentioned an information office in “the writers building,” so that’s where I went on my second day in Calcutta.

The Writers Building turned out to be a vast warren of offices that covered a city block. Freelance scribes crowded the sidewalks around it, filling out forms for a fee and offering to guide petitioners through the offices inside.



The bottom end of Indian public transpor in 1960. This ferry boat connected with a passenger train to convey travelers across the Brahmaputra river. At the other side of the river you scraped the mud off your shoes and boarded another train.

Capitalism in Calcutta



A typical way station on one of the main lines, early in the morning. Trains stop for 15-20 minutes so the passengers can buy food.

I spent nearly the whole day going from office to office in the Writers Building. Each office looked the same: a man behind a desk, several assistants without desks, and piles of papers everywhere. The routine was also uniform. After minutely examining both sides of my youth hostel card, the man behind the desk would speak.

"This is not in my area of responsibility, you know, but I am sure my friend Mr. Chatterjee can satisfy your needs. My assistant will guide you to his office. Meanwhile, you must be fatigued. You will take tea."

The *chai wallah* would bring a couple of little glasses on a tray, a chair would magically appear, and we would talk. About American materialism, Indian philosophy, international amity, and so on. After thirty minutes I would be led to another office, where exactly the same playlet was performed.

By the end of the day I had learned nothing about youth hostels in India, nor had I observed any useful work actually being done inside the Writers Building. But I had enjoyed some inter-

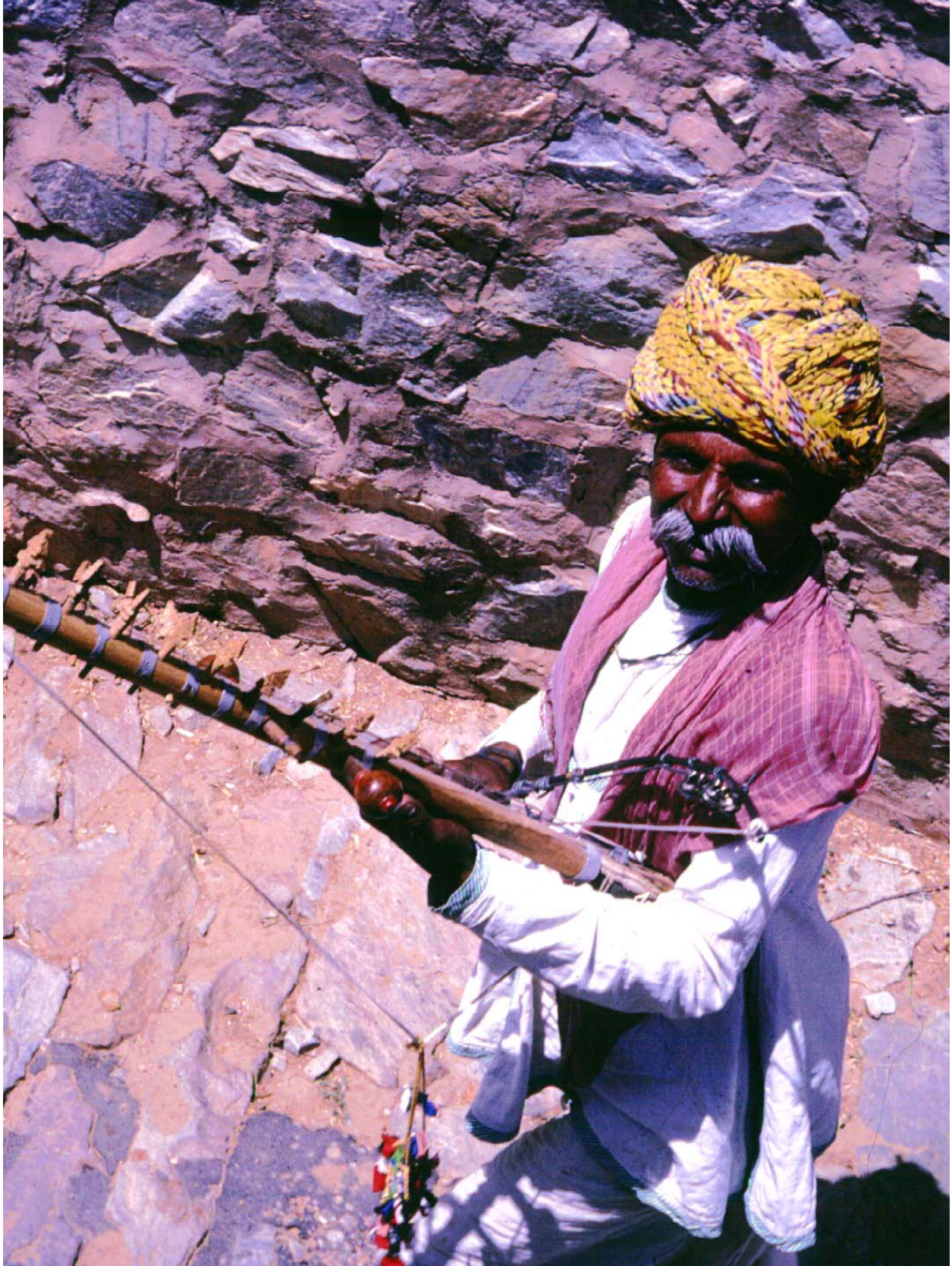
Indian Railway Stations

RAILWAY STATIONS IN INDIA are public spaces; you don't need a ticket to get to the platform. So the platform becomes a default home for beggars, vendors, touts, and people with no better place to go.

An open platform also encourages ticketless passengers to find a way to jump on the train, the preferred seating being on the roof. I once watched a massively bearded railway guard, clad only in a great brown robe like an Old Testament prophet, lumbering along the track as the train started to move. He plucked hangers-on from the side of the carriage like so many barnacles, belaboring them with a huge knobby cudgel. Those who were lucky enough to see him coming dropped off and ran for their lives.

esting conversations. Perhaps the place should have been called the Talkers Building.

Travel Bumming: India



When you ride an elephant up to the palace at Amber, you are preceded by squeaky violin music, allegedly to soothe the beast.

Capitalism in Calcutta

At Home with Amit. On my fourth visit to India, in 1981, I acquired a friend in Calcutta—Amitananda Das, a Mensan who ran a small electronics business and helped publish a Bengali literary journal on the side. At that time he lived with his family, and they kindly put me up in a little room on the flat roof of their house.

We spent many hours discussing the “Indian situation,” an example of which lived on his family’s doorstep. They had given a *wallah* of indeterminate age permission to sleep on the front porch, out of the weather, in return for guarding the house at night. To support himself, he set up a kerosene cooker each morning in the front yard and made spiced bread thingies wrapped in leaves, which he sold for a penny to the rickshaw pullers.



A billboard in downtown Delhi. I never saw anyone actually wear such a turban.

Without this arrangement the man on the porch might not have survived, for there was no “safety net” applicable to him. The rule was work or starve. Thus did the wheels of the Indian economy revolve. It was capitalism in its purest form.

The Armpit of India. People who rank poverty and squalor often rate Calcutta as the worst city in the world. Within its environs, the worst public place must surely be the Howrah railway station. You descend from the crowded Hooghly River overcrossing into what appears to be a seething mass of shouting, struggling humanity. Porters carrying trunks on their heads elbow their way through cripples and beggars into a dim, cavernous Gehenna, reeking with the mixed odors of spices, sweat, decay, and human excrement.



A Hindu wedding in Agra, complete with the groom arriving on a horse and the bride in what appears to be a state of shock. 1977.

Indian Trains

DESPITE ALL THE ABUSE that's been heaped on the British raj, it can be credited with building the Indo-Pakistani rail system. Unfortunately passenger demand long ago outran the system's capacity, so the trains are always crowded. Getting a seat reservation can be an immense hassle. Yet if you want to see India on the ground, trains are the way to go. They're great theater, with the lower classes even more colorful than the upper.

Life on an Indian train is a microcosm of life in India itself. In the 1960s there were five classes of travel: third, intermediate, second, first, and air-conditioned first. Air conditioning was inadvisable, even if you didn't mind the price (roughly 20 times third class), because when the machinery failed you could bake to death in the sealed car. At the other end, third class could be truly grubby. So I usually opted for second or intermediate class, which had windows you could open and also seemed to offer the widest variety of English-speaking company.

The first time I entered the Howrah station, the stone dome of the main hall seemed designed to focus the smell and the noise into my senses. Whole families lived in heaps on the floor, the babies naked and the mothers holding out their spindly arms for *baksheesh*. When I finally clawed my way to my train, the calm interior of the carriage felt like a joyous release.

During the three times I've been through Howrah (1960, 1981, and 1997) it has either improved slightly or I've become more inured. But I still tell people that if they want to experience the bottom of the world they should go to Howrah and depart Calcutta by train.

The Streets of Delhi

The British built New Delhi next to "Old" Delhi after World War I, creating a Western

environment for colonial servants and visiting businessmen. It's where you find the embassies and the upscale hotels, whereas Delhi proper is where the action is.

The Great Delhi Mall. Chandni Chowk, running a mile and a half from the Fatehpuri Mosque to the massive Red Fort, is perhaps the greatest shopping street in Asia. Cars, people, camels, pedicabs, and sacred cows compete for passage, while cubbyhole shops in the maze-like bazaars on both sides sell everything the world has to offer.

I watched the anguish of a cabbage vendor on the Chandni Chowk, as a sacred cow ambled over and started eating the inventory off his pushcart. It was unthinkable to drive the animal away, so the vendor just wrung his hands as his day's profits disappeared, munch by munch. But soon he developed a plan. He gently lifted the cabbage that bossy was eating and walked slowly backward, the cow following and munching. He deposited the cabbage on a rival's pushcart—Hey, I'm making you a gift, don't complain—and rapidly wheeled his own cart off into the crowd.

Where to Stay? My first hotel in New Delhi (1960) cost less than \$2 a night for a quiet room without bedding, bathroom, or air conditioning.



Cartoon India always features a turbaned snake charmer. I finally found such a person performing for tourists in front of the US Embassy. 1968.

The Streets of Delhi



The ultimate icon of India is the Taj Mahal. I took this picture in 1968, when the place was relatively uncrowded.

At the time it seemed perfectly adequate. As my tastes and circumstances matured over four subsequent visits, the price edged up. My latest favorite is the Janpath, located on one of the broad avenues that radiate from Connaught Circus. It's an air-conditioned Western-style hotel (but not quite Hilton-level), which in 1997 set me and Dany back \$58 a night.

The Janpath's casual restaurant served both Indian and Western food, with only an occasional miss. Feeling homesick, I once ordered their interpretation of baked lasagna, billed as "lasanga" on the menu. It turned out that no one had advised the chef to boil the big flat noodles before baking them, so the dish came out with a uniquely crunchy texture.



The beauty of the Taj is not just large-scale. Its marble walls are intricately carved.

Fun at the Circus. Connaught Circus, a short walk from the Janpath, is the umbilicus of New Delhi, a large ring of colonnaded buildings around a scruffy park. It's where you can eat a real chocolate fudge sundae at the "Kwality" ice cream parlor or cash a check at American Express. Little boys—runners on commission—pluck your sleeve to drag you into hole-in-the-wall travel agencies, where you can buy leftover plane seats to Europe for half price. It's also the place where an enterprising

shoeshine *wallah* squirted fresh cow poop on my shoes and then blandly offered to clean it off. I was so outraged I shouted him away. But then I had to spend half an hour in the hotel toilet, scrubbing the stuff out of my shoelaces.

During the 60s and 70s a flock of American hippies came to roost in Delhi. One couple set up a unique street business in Connaught Circus. They somehow talked an Indian baker into setting aside his chappaties and baking a passable version of American white bread. Then they located peanut butter and strawberry jam in one of the bazaars. There they were—selling real peanut-butter-and-jam sandwiches at \$2 a pop to homesick American tourists, who gobbled these goodies up as fast as the two hippies could make them.



Most Indians are teetotalers; but when they do imbibe, they're not shy about it.

The Mysteries of Benares

As a boy I read and reread a volume of *Believe It Or Not* that devoted a whole chapter to the “mystical” city of Benares. It was a place where holy men spent their lives staring at the sun, while *fakirs* climbed ropes into thin air. So in 1960 it was clearly essential that I go there.

The Technology of Death.

Today, much of the action in Varanasi (as it is now called) is closed to non-Hindus, but forty years ago you could go just about anywhere your stomach would allow. Corpses thrown into the holy Ganges sometimes had small gold coins stuffed in their navels; so shortly downriver agile little boys would dive into the mud and muck, groping underwater for dead bellies.



A burning ghat in Benares, 1960. Notice that the deceased's feet are painted red. I had to skedaddle after taking this picture.

The Mysteries of Benares



Early morning at a bathing ghat in Benares, 1960. Men and women mingled together, although there was also a women-only ghat.

Farther downriver, worshippers on the Bathing Ghats—men and women together—greeted the dawn by stripping down and wading into the murky water as bits of flesh and excrement drifted by. Meanwhile, in the fetid lanes behind the river, street hawkers sold flowers, incense, and little stone phalluses.

One morning I watched a burning ghat in operation. The deceased, a woman of advanced age, was swathed in white linen. Her feet and head had been painted earthy red. As the family watched, she was placed over a concrete pit and the sticks under her were lighted. Acrid smoke drifted about. As the flames did their job, an



Buddhist monks taking a class at Bodhi Gaya, 1960. I don't know why the two *wallahs* are hanging around. Maybe they hope to learn something.

attendant came around with a pair of tongs, picking up her disconnected hands and feet and dropping them into the center of the fire. It didn't take long to translate somebody's mother into a pile of blackened, smoldering lumps.

I fled through the back streets of Benares to my dollar-a-night hotel. Mystical or not, the place had a charnel quality that I have never quite been able to forget.

Buddhist India

A central icon of Buddhism is the mound-like structure variously called a *tope* or *stupa* in India, a *chorten* in Tibet, and a *dagoba* in Ceylon. It is often built to house a relic of the Buddha—a lock of hair, a toenail, or whatever—which is buried deep in its innards. The conical architecture of the stupa migrated eastward and acquired other uses, eventually showing up as the ubiquitous pagoda in China and Japan.

My Pilgrimage. The ur-stupa, the mother of them all, is the one at Bodh Gaya, the birthplace of Buddhism. It was there that the young Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment while sitting under a bodhi tree. At Berkeley I had spent a year studying Indian art, including a dollop of Buddhist religion, so in 1960 it was natural that I hied me to Bodh Gaya, hoping to find my own bodhi tree. Eventually my pilgrimage took me to Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, and to Sanchi, where Emperor Asoka thrust Buddhism into the cultural mainstream of India, 2,300 years ago.

I never attained enlightenment, but I learned a bit about the way some Indians live and think. Buddhism's inherent gentleness, together with its emphasis on wholeness and acceptance, seemed to me an attractive counterweight to our Judeo-Christian obsession with force and punishment. While we try to beat the world into submission, they try to fit themselves into it. Maybe just seeing that difference amounted to a kind of enlightenment after all.



The Buddhist dagoba at Anarhadapura, Ceylon.

Cave-Crawling. Buddhism evoked an artistic flowering in India during the seventh and eighth centuries AD, which today is primarily visible in the cave decorations of central India—particularly the paintings at Ajanta and the sculptures at Ellora. I spent several days doing the grand tour in 1968 and came away with a tangle of memories—frescoes of delicately bejeweled *apsaras* smiling down from the walls, solemnly seated stone Buddhas, and images of *Shiva Nataraja*, the multi-armed “dancing Shiv,” an import from Hinduism. The Buddha of the Blue Lotus, painted on the wall of one of the Ajanta caves, I found to be justly celebrated. But it saddened me to think that some of the best Indian art survived only because it was hidden away underground.

Big Bad Bombay

Raj buffs love the monumental “Gateway of India” that overlooks the Bombay waterfront, even though it wasn't built until 1924, when the Raj was staggering to a close. Across the street I “took tea” at the ornate Taj Mahal Hotel and

Spicy Madras

bought a cheap print of gold-caparisoned elephants parading in the Durbar of 1887. All very *pukka* stuff.

Feeding the Birds. But Bombay had its dark side as well. I was fascinated by the Towers of Silence, wooden platforms inside a heavily-guarded compound, on which the Parsis exposed their dead to be consumed by vultures. You couldn't see the platforms but you could see the birds circling above, obviously well-fed. Local legend had it that when the winds were right they flew over the municipal reservoir, dropping the odd bit of human flesh into Bombay's water supply.

Naked in the Streets. Like Hamburg and Amsterdam, Bombay had an official red light district, centered around Falkland Road. Dany and I toured the area by taxi in 1992. I got hooted at by the girls and Dany saw a naked man walking in the street. Big thrill.

Through it all, Bombay was noisy, bustling, and expensive. Not just expensive by Indian standards, but *really* expensive. At one point, its Westernized business district boasted the most costly real estate on the planet. The one time I stayed there overnight, in 1968, I reduced my outlay by cadging a bed from some Peace Corps people.

Spicy Madras

From Bombay to Madras by train is a long haul across the heart of Mother India—a day and a

Sleeping on Trains

THE FIRST TIMES I rode the Indian trains, in 1960 and '68, I followed the established travel-bum technique for getting a berth in a second-class car with wooden seating. You arrived at the station early, leaping aboard the empty train as it rumbled in. You headed for the big wooden luggage rack overhead, which was wide enough to hold your sleeping bag. Having staked out six feet of space, you defended it against other passengers trying to throw their metal trunks on top of you. Your argument was that they could put their stuff on the seat you would have otherwise occupied, if they were able find it. After things quieted down, you slept peacefully above the tumult and the animals.

On later and better-financed trips, I reserved compartments in first-class sleeping cars. They typically held four people and offered reasonably clean bedding. In 1997, my wife and I and my 11-year-old daughter spent three nights crossing Indian by train. We had to make reservations by telex a month in advance, but it was worth it.

half on the Madras Mail. In 1968 this trip thrust me from cosmopolitan, pushy northern India to laid-back southern India, with its equatorial heat and casual lifestyle.

Hot Stuff. Madras curry is famous for its spiciness. I ordered a serving at the railway station restaurant and was presented with a bowl that appeared to be filled with yellow grease. But fishing around in the bottom I dredged up a piece of meat the size of my finger, bright scarlet in color, which I wolfed down.

For the next hour or so I could feel this morsel burning its way inside me, as it traversed my intestines from side to side. The next morning, of course, I felt it again, but that's a less attractive story.



The obverse of the 100-rupee note reflects India's linguistic diversity. On the left side the phrase "One Hundred Rupees" is repeated in thirteen different scripts.



Mahabalipuram, in southern India, had a splendid beach but no California-style beach bunnies. What a loss! 1968.

Tiptoeing Into the Sea. The red sandstone temples at Mahabalipuram, south of Madras, are romantically perched on bluffs overlooking the Indian Ocean. Alas! For 1,200 years the salt air has been inexorably reducing their stonework to powder, so by the time I got there only the interior carvings were still recognizable.

The beach was more interesting. I spent an afternoon there watching Indians engaged in some very tentative sea bathing. Not for them the tan or the bikini—they tiptoed into the ocean fully clothed. Moreover, their interactions with the waves were filled with trepidation, as if they were performing a dangerous and exotic ritual.

As a sometime California beach bum, I felt like grabbing one of the men, stripping him down, throwing him into the surf, and saying “There, that’s the way to do it.” But I realized that my travel bumming experiences were already rich enough without adding to them a visit to the local lock-up.

Naughty Orissa

The Orissa Coast, on the eastern shore of India south of Calcutta, provides spacious beaches and ornately carved temples. I spent a week at Puri, swimming in the Bay of Bengal and

watching the fishermen pull in their boats. They had netted a huge yellow-banded sea snake, which thrashed about on the sand as they poked it with sticks. As it finally found the sea and slithered away, I began to reconsider the swimming part of my visit. This was in February, 1981.

Sex in Stone. A few miles from Puri I found Konarak, the site of one of India’s famous pornographic temples. On every ledge and alcove were carvings of lovers, apparently trying out all of the 128 positions diagrammed in the *Kama Sutra*. Some of the acrobatics seemed mostly theoretical and only barely sexy, but they all looked like fun.

The Original Juggernaut. Puri is the site of the annual Car Festival, in which images of Sri Jaggannath (the Lord of the Universe) and his family are hauled on huge wooden carts along a great, flat road to the Gundicha temple, about a kilometer away.

It was not Festival time (and a good thing, too, as close to a million bodies show up for it), but I was able to glimpse one of the cars through a knothole in its wooden shed. Juggernaut it was, and I could easily visualize the old tales of frenzied worshippers throwing themselves

Royal Rajasthan

under the unstoppable wheels, determined to be ground to death in an ecstasy of religious fervor.

Royal Rajasthan

Much of Hollywood's idea of India—bejeweled princes living in marble palaces—stems from nineteenth-century life in the western state of Rajasthan. In 1992 Dany and I sprang for a night's stay in a real palace at Jodhpur, where the cash-strapped maharajah let out rooms, but we found it cold and formal. More *gemütlich* was the Lake Pichola Hotel in Udaipur, a former palace, where our room included a little marble balcony stuck out over the lake.

Rent-an-Elephant. The triangle formed by Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra forms the core of tourist India. Delhi is the capital, Agra features the Taj Mahal, and Jaipur is the land of the Rajahs.

Near Jaipur you could hire an elephant for the climb to the Amber Palace. While your canopied howdah swayed from side to side, a footman marched ahead, playing squeaky tunes on a sort of violin. You paid ten rupees for the service, which allegedly soothed the beast; but

its actual purpose was to dress up what some might call a mere tourist ride, converting it into an Exotic and Regal Procession. The Punjabi Paganini is pictured on page 50.

The Taj. At Agra, of course, one views the Taj Mahal. It is beautiful, in both design and details, and justly famous. Over the years from 1960 to 1997 I watched the Taj become increasingly gentrified. In 1960 you could step off a pedicab at the great sandstone gateway and stroll into a garden of relative quiet and calm. By 1997 all had changed. Battalions of diesel buses disgorged Japanese tourists past the gewgaw shops into a maelstrom of hawkers and guides. Mumtaz, the beloved queen for whom the Taj was constructed, would not have been amused.

A Hindu Life Plan. On my first visit to Rajasthan, in 1960, I criss-crossed the great desert, both seeing the sights and ducking in and out of Pakistan. The long rail trips across the arid plateau were ideal for making friends.

Somewhere between Ajmer and Bikaner I met a man named Rameswamy, a geological engineer, who was happy to spend his day on the train talking technology. But he also told me his life plan as a Hindu. When he reached his 50s, having provided for his family, he planned to leave them and spend the rest of his life as a *sadhu*, a wandering holy man. It was a perfectly explicit project, much as an American might look forward to retirement in Florida. I sometimes think of Rameswamy and wonder whether he actually did it.

An Udder Failure. At the other end of the spiritual spectrum, Helmut was a German travel bum who had grown up on a farm in Bavaria. I met him on the train in Rajasthan as he was doing his Indian *wanderung*.

Helmut's knowledge of animal husbandry was extensive, although he was sometimes a bit short on tact. He roamed the second-class carriage until he cornered an Indian dairy farmer, then drilled him.



The high life in old India, as depicted on a temple at Khajuraho. 1968.



Our houseboat in Kashmir. It may look beat-up and rickety, but it was comfortable and it was home. 1977.

“So how much milk gives your cow?,” he demanded. The Indian cited a modest number of liters per day.

“Hah,” Helmut thundered back, “in Germany we shoot such a cow!”

The Cool Life in Kashmir

Houseboating in Kashmir is a fantasy high on every travel bum’s list, but doing it has never been easy. For starters, it’s a two-day land journey from Delhi—train to Pathankot followed by a mountainous bus ride to Srinagar. Then the political climate between India and Pakistan has tended to fluctuate, making the region variously on and off limits. Finally, most of the houseboats hold at least six people. If you are single or a couple, you either have to pay for a whole boat or get billeted with a bunch of fly-in tourists who may or may not enjoy being cooped up with a “grubby backpacker.”

For all these reasons, I deferred houseboating until April, 1977, when all the conditions were right. I was leading a group of four, trekking through Afghanistan and into India; we had a reasonable budget; and things were momentarily quiet in the Vale of Kashmir.

Life on Dal Lake. We found the houseboat office right by the bus station at Srinagar. There were a half-dozen classes of boats, from ordinary to super-deluxe. We picked deluxe, second from the top. Deluxe boats normally slept six, but traffic was slow and the office agreed to book one for just us four. Within minutes we were being rowed in a *shikara*—a sort of water taxi—out on Dal Lake. The lake was appropriately named, for *dal* is a kind of Indian pea soup.

Many of the boats were moored in rows, like tract homes, but ours was nicely isolated. It had a fine porch from which to observe the lake, as well as a living room, dining room, and three bedrooms. A family of servants lived in a

The Golden Temple

smaller boat behind; he cooked, she cleaned, and the daughters waited on table.

We soon settled into a life of idleness. The boat was nicely stocked with Victorian novels and there was an ancient wireless set. Curiously enough, its strongest signal was a short-wave station in the Seychelles that played 1930s big-band music. I remember vividly sitting on the porch in a wicker chair, watching traffic on the lake, as the tootling of Benny Goodman drifted out of the living room.

Boats constantly rowed up to our abode, selling everything from fresh vegetables to souvenir wood carvings. One enterprising tailor even climbed in the window while we were at dinner, his arms draped with fabric samples. We shouted him off in a scene straight from *The Three Stooges*.

To visit the town, we just summoned a passing *shikara* to take us to shore. It was a fine life, and I could appreciate how the officials of the Raj looked forward to spending the hot months of summer living it. But it wasn't a *travel bum's* life.

The Golden Temple

There are temples and there are Temples. For years I had heard about the Golden Temple of Amritsar—and passed near it going between India and Pakistan—but had never bothered to go see it. Finally in 1977 I made the detour.

The Guru Granth Sahib. It was well worth a visit. The temple was indeed golden, a compact little building shimmering in the heat of the Punjab. It was surrounded by a reflecting pool, which was itself enclosed by galleries of the purest white stone. The Golden Temple constituted the center of the Sikh religion.

I walked a narrow causeway over the lake and peered inside the temple. On the floor, nestled in carpets and cushions, was a huge book, at least six feet square. This was the holy Granth, 1,430 pages of writings composed by various Sikh masters over the centuries.

A reader was intoning the book's contents. I was told that the reading went on continuously, night and day. Presumably when the reader reached the last word, a team of book-handlers



The Golden Temple in Amritsar, northeastern India—the center of the Sikh religion and a remarkable building in its own right. 1977.



The boat from India to Ceylon, 1968. The two other Westerners aboard this trip were British ex-pats, retired to India.

must have come in to turn the huge pages back to the beginning.

Fabled Ceylon

Pardon me for not calling it Sri Lanka. From the earliest age when I could read Kipling, the name “Ceylon” filled me with fantasies of jungles and elephants, temples and rajahs. Even today this island south of India boasts the world’s most gorgeous banknotes, decorated with parrots, monkeys, and moonstones. “Sri Lanka” somehow doesn’t convey the same tone.

Down to the Sea. On the first of March, 1968, I climbed into a creaky open boat for the trip across Adam’s Bridge, a short stretch of shoal water between Rameswaram, India, and Danushkodi, Ceylon. The Indian Ocean was calm and shipping was active. In the distance I could see a pair of boats lashed together, a small automobile straddling the two. We sailed the sea for a couple of hours, never fully losing sight of land, until Ceylon hove into sight.

The legendary hero Rama is said to have crossed that way to rescue his wife from the

demon Ravanna. On a calm day like mine he would hardly have gotten his tootsies wet.

On Buddha’s Trail. Barely three years after I went there, the Tamil Tigers started making things dicey in northern Ceylon and tourist traffic ground to a halt. But in 1968 it was easy to work your way peacefully south by trains and buses.

The dagoba at Anuradhapura, a massive hemisphere covered in blinding whitewash, was flashier than the stupas I had seen in India. It was supposed to house a cutting from Buddha’s fig tree. Farther south, Polonnaruwa featured a reclining Buddha; it was not quite as gaudy as the one in Burma, but it had been laboriously carved from a mass of solid granite.

At Sigiriya I found a ruined palace on top of a rock monolith, with delicate frescoes of buxom dancing girls in a grotto near the base. To climb up, you originally had to jam your hands and feet into “steps”—barely more than scratches in the sheer rock face—for the 600-foot climb. After a few intrepid tourists had dropped screaming to their deaths, the British installed a more sensible system of stairs and handrails.

Fabled Ceylon

Seeking the Tooth. Despite all these marvels, my favorite memory of Ceylon still has to be the viewing of Buddha's Tooth. The Tooth was located at Kandy, a pleasant hill town in the south part of the island, where it was kept in a reliquary deep inside its own massive temple.

Luck vouchsafed my presence during a Showing. As night fell the doors of the temple were mobbed by a huge crowd, and when they swung open I was propelled inside by a sea of bodies. The evening was hot and the worshippers threw off clouds of spicy sweat. Pious ladies in bright silk saris variously mumbled, wailed, and howled as the crush filled every crevice of the interior.

Eventually a priest produced a golden box and held it over his head. The crowd of devotees exploded. I remember thinking at the time, "that must be the Tooth, the whole Tooth, and nothing but the Tooth." Some worshippers roared, some averted their eyes, and a few fell to the floor. I managed to squirm through a side door into the open air. The familiar stars shone overhead. But having stood bareheaded in the presence of the Tooth, I knew my life could never be the same.

Pachyderm Play. Before busing down to the port city of Colombo I visited Katugastota, there to get intimate with elephants. As the animals wallowed in the Mahaweli River, the mahouts were happy to let you help wash one, sit on its

trunk, and generally lose yourself in pachyderm play. The elephants, on vacation from hauling teak, seemed to enjoy the attention too.

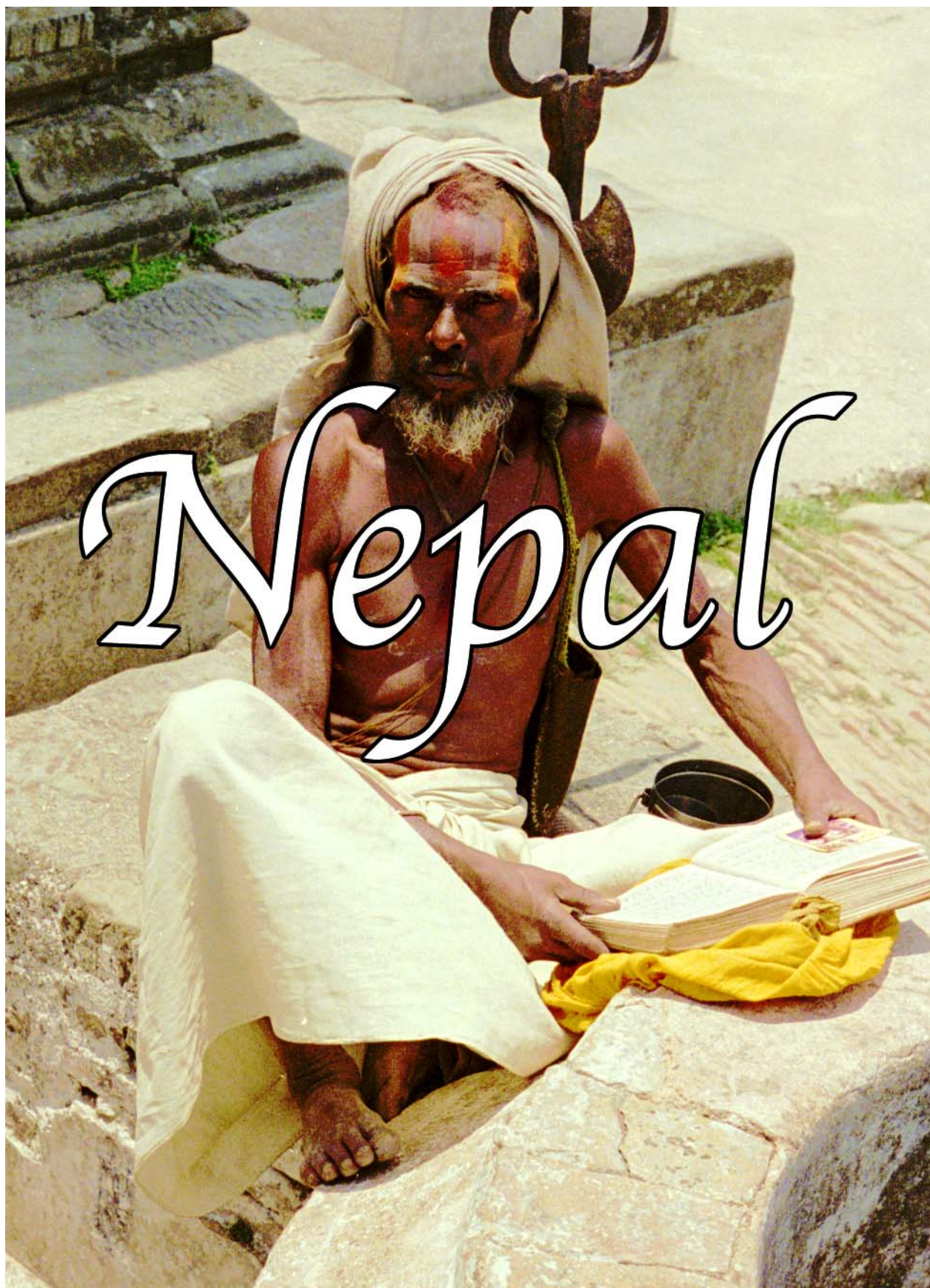
In the midst of such diversions I met a British girl, a local resident, who had landed what sounded like the ideal expatriate job. She sat under an umbrella all day, counting elephants as they walked past. Each beast carried a teak log, and her tally became the basis for paying various contractors. She was hired for this undemanding position primarily because she was meticulous and incorruptible. But what a cushy job! I mean, how much effort does it take to count elephants?

🚲 *Nepal, one of the more fascinating countries of Asia, was closed to the ordinary traveler before 1955. In that year the Rajpath road was completed, running from Raxaul in northern India over the Himalayas to Kathmandu. The resulting traffic jolted Nepal into the twentieth century.*

When I wandered onto the scene, at the end of October, 1960, public transport over the road to Nepal was still difficult and somewhat iffy. A bus was rumored to run, but I had become wary of rumored buses—particularly ones that ran in late fall over 12,000-foot mountain passes. So I opted to fly with the newly-minted Royal Nepal Airlines. They possessed one DC-3, which flew a daily round trip from Patna.



Although taken in Bangladesh, this photo pretty well reflects village life in India, at least in the wetter regions of Bengal. 1960.



Nepal



When you turned a street corner in Kathmandu, you never knew what to expect. But whatever it was, it often involved blood.
Overleaf: A studious sadhu at Pashupatinath, in the countryside outside Kathmandu. 1997.

Primitive Kathmandu



A nepalese road crew at work in the hills above Kathmandu. 1960.

MY 1960 FLIGHT INTO NEPAL was everything I could have wanted. The two propellers whined and strained as the plane threaded its way through the valleys of the Himalayas, while immense peaks rose above it on both sides. From the tiny plastic windows you had to look upward to see the landscape. Finally the plane emerged from the last snowy pass into a Shangri-la of green fields and sturdy brick houses—the valley of Kathmandu—and plumped down on the Maharaja's polo field.

Primitive Kathmandu

In 1960 there was one very basic hotel in Kathmandu, and for two dollars I booked their finest room. It was the finest because it boasted an electric light dangling from the ceiling. In hushed tones, the proprietor claimed that I was honored with one of the hundred or so light bulbs in all of Nepal. Sure enough, as the sun went down someone cranked up the Royal Generator and my bulb began to glow a dull orange.



In Nepal, even an ordinary flight of steps can be dressed up.



The spooky, all-seeing eyes of the Swayambhunath Temple stare across the river at Kathmandu.

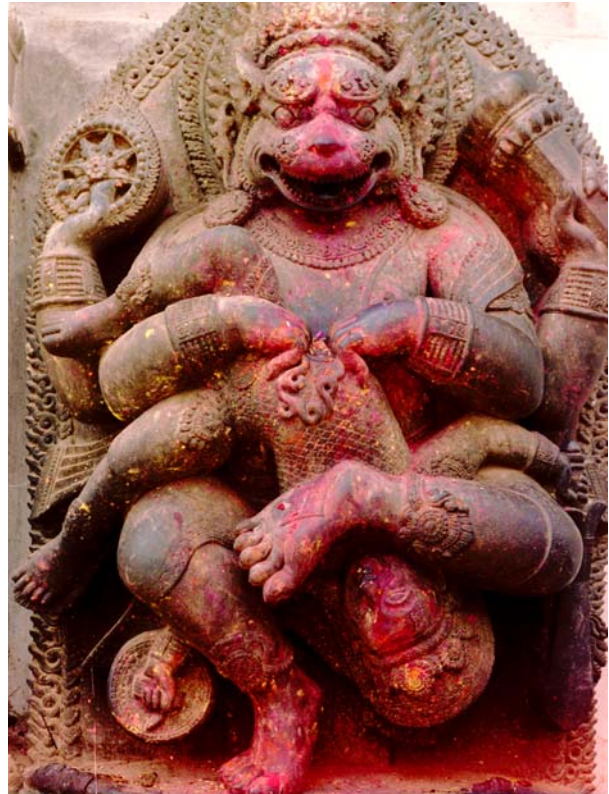
Primitive Kathmandu

It was the week before the Kennedy-Nixon election, so I had bought a copy of Time Magazine at the Patna airport to catch up on the news. I sat down on my bed to have a leisurely read. Unfortunately the sun had already set and my bulb was barely functioning.

After straining to make out a few words, I gave up and went out in the square to get a dish of curry for dinner. After I returned to the hotel my bulb began to shine a bit more brightly, doubtless the result of other customers turning off theirs. So I bided my time, and by eight-thirty it was possible, by standing on a chair with the bulb next to my ear, to spell out my magazine. Then at nine o'clock the generator suddenly shut down, leaving me in the dark. And so to bed, as Pepys used to say.

Business in Nepal. The next day I looked up an American anthropologist who lived with his wife and son in Jawlakhel, across the river from Kathmandu. His digs were modest, but he found space for my sleeping bag on his kitchen table.

We talked that evening about the folkways of Nepal and he told me the story of his son's



Nepal seemed to specialize in ugly, but fascinating, statues.



In the main square of Kathmandu, a magician and his assistant busily do their thing. 1960.

Travel Bumming: Nepal



Kathmandu in 1960, before the hippies arrived, was a quiet, down-home place, despite the temples and weird statues.

bicycle. It was a British model, ordered through a shop in the city, and after much delay it had finally been delivered. But a few weeks later there was some slippage in the coaster brake, so my friend had disassembled it. He found that every part inside the brake was old and worn—presumably taken from the bicycle dealer's discard bin to replace a new part liberated from the machine he was delivering.

Magic à la Carte. Kathmandu was a mysterious place. The buildings had odd carvings on them, and when you turned a corner you might suddenly be confronted by a grotesque painting of a Hindu deity. In a corner of the main square a man was busy performing magic, his dishes of herbs and flowers laid out neatly before him. Just across the river you could find the exotic Swayambhunath Temple, a great white stupa with all-seeing eyes painted on the sides of its crown.

Nepal Grows Up. My first visit to Nepal, in 1960, lasted only six days. Public transport was

almost nonexistent, and you needed elaborate permits to leave the main valley. On the plane I had met a Swedish missionary who invited me to stay with him at Tansing, only 50 miles west of Kathmandu; but to get there I would have had to walk most of the way.

It wasn't until 1997 that I returned to Nepal, with Dany and Diane, to see the country properly. By then, of course, a wave of American hippies had come and gone and Nepal had become an established destination for adventurous travelers.

What the country had gained in accessibility over 37 years it had lost in primitive charm. Nevertheless, I wound up my second visit by making a pilgrimage to the Royal Nepal Air Lines office, where I presented the manager with a copy of the photo I had taken of their first plane, back in 1960. It seemed like a fitting memorial for a country that had mutated during those years from awkward, mysterious beauty to a kind of workaday tourism.

Rhino Rustling

The well-oiled tourist machinery of 1997 let me and my family take a side trip to the Chitwan forest south of Kathmandu. Before we went to Nepal, Dany and I had jokingly promised Diane a ride on an elephant for her eleventh birthday. Here was an opportunity not only to do that, but to chase rhinos into the bargain.

After several hours by Jeep and a short river trip by pirogue, we arrived at a forest camp with an attached elephant park. Several elephants were being scrubbed in the river, an activity they obviously enjoyed. Each animal had a *mahout* that lived with it, took care of it, and rode proudly on its head.

The camp was equipped with a platform from which we clambered into a wooden *howdah* on the elephant's back. With the mahout seated on its head, the beast lumbered into the jungle as we fended off the overhanging foliage.

No Sleep for the Weary. Soon a napping rhinoceros came into view and the fun began. The elephant seemed to be trained to befuddle the rhino, by rushing at it while wagging its ears. The elephant seemed to be saying, "Nyaa, nyaa, nyaa," while the rhino's attitude was more



Our mahout and his elephant were expert at bothering rhinos.



A recently roused rhino trying to understand what's going on. Understanding does not come easily for a rhino. 1997.

like “Hey, buddy, what’s your problem?” The whole encounter was so unnatural that when the elephant became too bothersome the rhino simply turned tail and trotted off in disbelief.

So it went for a couple of hours, interrupting the siestas of a dozen bewildered animals. In their private conversations, the rhinos of Nepal must have called Chitwan “The Forest of the Lunatic Elephants.”

Country Towns

During my second visit to Nepal, Dany and I hired a car and explored all the places that had been impossible for me to reach the first time. Pashupatinath was a Hindu temple complex with a ghat for burning bodies—not as elaborate as Benares, but more accessible. Bhadgaon was

Hippies

I DIDN’T DISLIKE THE HIPPIES of the 1960s; in fact, at times I was sort of one. But hippies, even the ones that poured through Asia in the latter part of the decade, were distinct from travel bums. Their values and goals were totally different.

Dr Johnson opined that every traveler should fortify himself with knowledge before he sets out. “He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him.” Most hippies I met carried very little mental wealth with them. They wanted to go to Kabul or Kathmandu because they had heard that “the scene” was laid back and the dope was cheap. When they got there, they spent most of their time simply coping. No cerebral exercise was involved.

Travel bums were more focused. They tended to be well-informed about the history and geography of the places they went. Their backpacks had books in them, not beads, and you could learn a lot by talking to them on the trains and buses. Conversing with a hippie, in contrast, was more like petting a dog—a warm experience but not a source of intellectual nourishment.



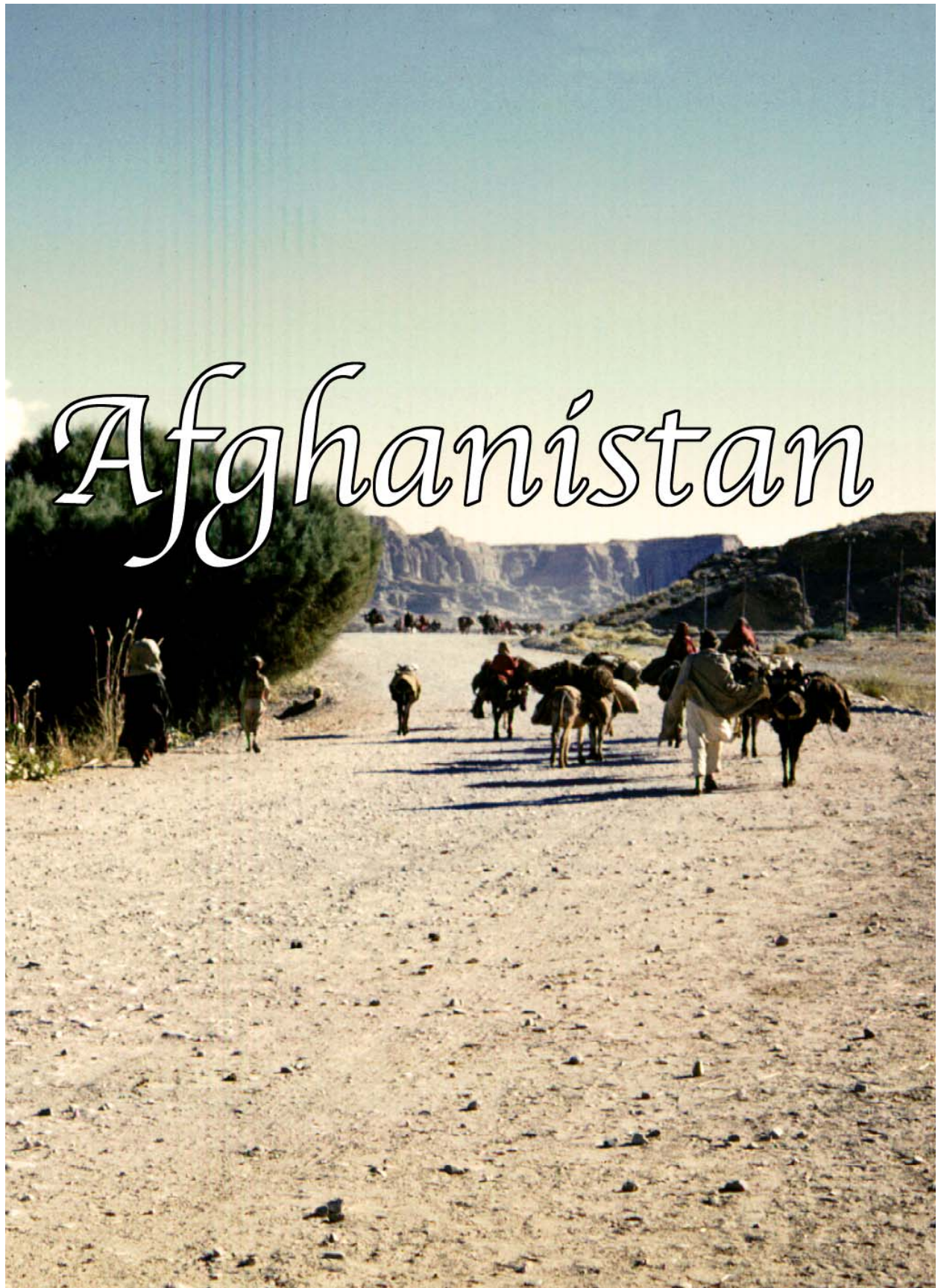
This sadhu offered to lift ten kilos with his schlong, a line he had doubtless polished in some Nepalese pickup bar.

an ancient holy city, filled with temples and bizarre statues. In between these major points were a host of temples, shrines, stupas, and lesser sights.

The Spiritual Life. Pashupatinath was crawling with *sadhus*, wandering Hindu mystics who combined various degrees of holiness with touches of rascality. The Milk Baba was said to nourish himself entirely on that substance. Another baba, doubtless encouraged by hippies, delighted in pointing out where marijuana grew wild among the temples. And one shifty-eyed sadhu proposed to demonstrate that he could lift a ten-kilo weight with his penis. Verily, the spiritual life taketh strange forms.

Badgaon was fully as fascinating as Kathmandu and much less overrun with gewgaw shops. Its statues and temples were full of hidden features, such as the bas-relief on a temple pillar of two elephants copulating in *the missionary position*. Some ancient craftsman must have chuckled himself silly as he carved that bit.

🚲 *Nepal was not the only out-of-the-way country I visited in 1960. I also made a foray into Afghanistan, to the west of India. Afghanistan was so congenial that I went back there two more times.*



Travel Bumming: Afghanistan



This kid from the country, newly arrived in Kabul, seemed to be as fascinated with me as I was with him. 1977.
Overleaf: The sparse, dry Afghan plateau, 1960.

1960: Mountain Folk



An Afghan “tea house” on the road near Kandahar. Besides tea they offered simple food and even a quiet corner to sleep in. 1960.

AFGHANISTAN CAME MUCH into the American consciousness after 9/11/2001, when our military went in and replaced its government. I had traveled there three times—in 1960, 1968, and 1977—and had come to admire the place. The high, dry terrain recaptured my Nevada childhood; its air was thin and pure, and at night you could hear the crisp sounds of the desert cooling down. The Afghan people were uncomplicated, sturdy, and independent. Their dealings were straight, for the most part, and you felt safe among them.

1960: Mountain Folk

My first foray into the country covered only the eastern part. The word in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, had been that public transport over the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan was somewhat brutal, even by Pakistani standards, and I had become iffy about trying it. But I met a German kid who had heard of a deal coming down in Peshawar, so we took the bus there and inquired at the Afghan

consulate. Sure enough, not only did they give us visas on the spot, they also sold us two seats in a new Mercedes-Benz sedan that was being



Getting a bus going by lighting a fire under it. Kandahar, 1968.

Travel Bumming: Afghanistan

Buses

BUSES IN ASIA AND AFRICA vary widely in quality. When tour operators fly groups from Europe or America, they usually greet their clients with shiny, luxurious coaches that sports such amenities as a toilet in the back. When travel bums go to the village bus park, they often find only aged, ramshackled contraptions that may or may not make it to the next town.

I found what may have been the bottom end of bus technology in Afghanistan in 1960. It was a handmade box on top of a truck chassis, with stools inside. Seats on the roof cost more than seats inside, because every time the bus hit a bump its roof came crashing down on the heads of the inside passengers. When the driver slammed on the brakes, everything inside—people and animals—piled forward in a heap. After each stop there was a mad scramble to relocate your stool before a sheep stole your place. In the US it might have been billed as a theme park ride.

But buses were often the only way to get from here to there. A hundred years of motor transport—and the roads to run it on—have done more than anything else to raise living standards in the Third World.

delivered to a government biggie in Kabul. The next day we found ourselves being driven over Khyber in considerable luxury and spent the night in Jalalabad, on the Afghan plateau.

Big Little City. Kabul in 1960 had a small-town feel about it. The country supported a real king (the same one who was deposed in 1973 and returned in 2002), so I took a look at his palace. The great Pol-i-Kisti mosque was closed to unbelievers, but I found a large and busy bazaar south of the river. In short, there was plenty to see. The best attraction, however, was the National Museum on the edge of town.

When Alexander the Great marched homeward from Asia, 2,300 years ago, he left behind colonies of Greeks who merged with the local population but retained many Hellenistic traditions. One result was the art of the old kingdom of Ghandara—busts and statues in the Buddhist style but carved with European faces. The Kabul museum had the premiere collection of these curiosities, and I spent an afternoon among them, trying to imagine what it must have felt like to be dropped on the other side of the world in the fourth century BC.

I'm glad I spent that day in the Kabul museum. Today the Ghandaran figurines that were its glory have been either broken to bits or smuggled into private collections. On the other hand, I regret that I didn't spend the two days it

would have taken to bus north to the giant stone Buddhas at Bamian. They too have been destroyed—gone with the fanatical Islamic wind.

A Rich American. From Kabul I bussed southwest to Kandahar, stopping overnight in the village of Mukur to get my shoes repaired. The local cobbler sat cross-legged in the market next to a pile of tire carcasses, from which he extracted bits of cord for his work.

In 1960 the principal monetary unit in Afghani-



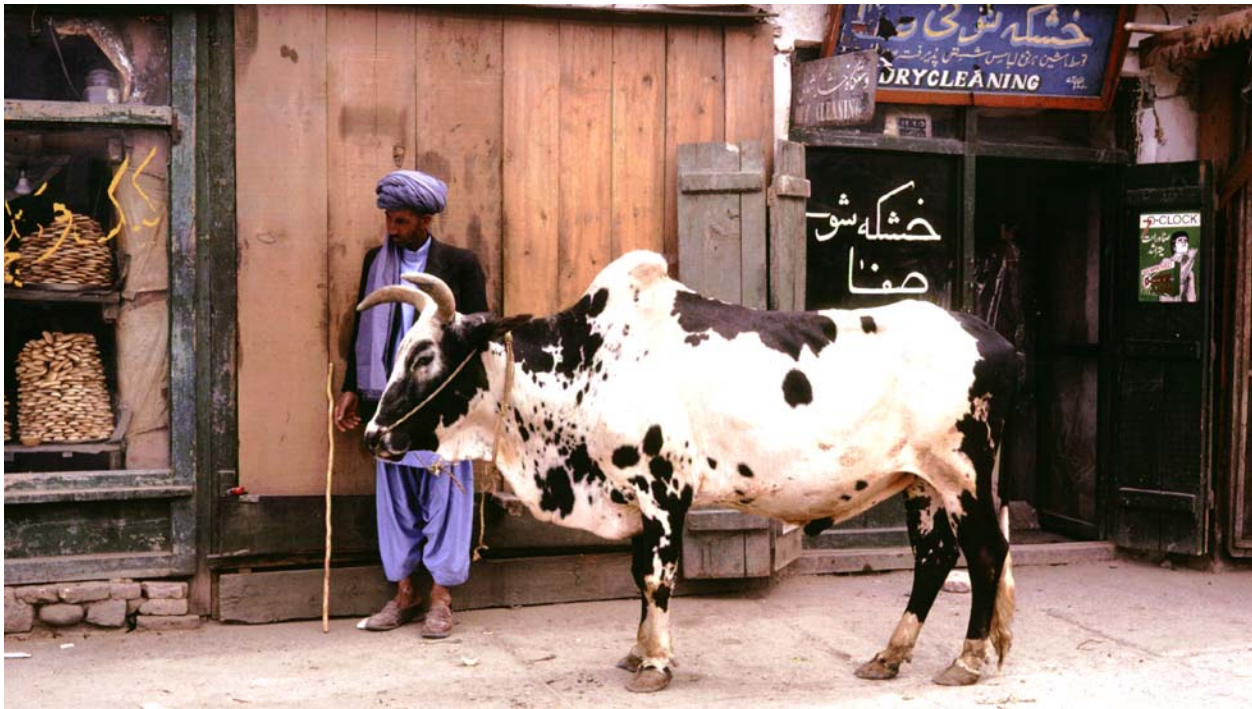
O, what a piece of work is an Afghan bus! In form and moving how bizarre! In action how clunky!... etc. [apologies to Shakespeare]. I bagged a picture of this specimen in 1960.



I got my shoes repaired in Mukur. 1960.

stan was the quarter-Afghani coin, a heavy brass dingus that was worth about half a cent US. The cobbler demanded five coins to sew up my shoes, which I doled out without demur. Apparently word spread through the bazaar that a rich tourist was in town, throwing his money around, for I was suddenly importuned from every side. I retreated to the safety of a tea hut and blew another quarter-Afghani on a glass of tea.

Hospitality Adventures. In Mukur I checked into the mud-brick hotel, distinguished from all the other architecture in town by having two stories. I was about to visit the squatty-type toilet downstairs when the proprietor started shouting in Pashto and waving his arms. It appeared that I should use the toilet upstairs. When I got there I discovered why; they shared one hole, straight down, so you might be busy downstairs when your light



On the street in Kabul, 1977. No, he has not just taken his bullock in for dry cleaning.

Travel Bumming: Afghanistan

was cut off by someone upstairs... Even today I don't want to think about it.

Apparently the Mukurians were not quite done with me. That evening, in the mud-brick restaurant, I was served a bowl of spicy meat. The restaurant's entire clientele formed a circle to watch me eat it, commenting on each bite. The next morning, a guy who spoke some English told me that I had performed a community service; they had always wanted to watch an unbeliever eat dog. The dish actually wasn't that bad, but it would never have put McDonald's out of business.

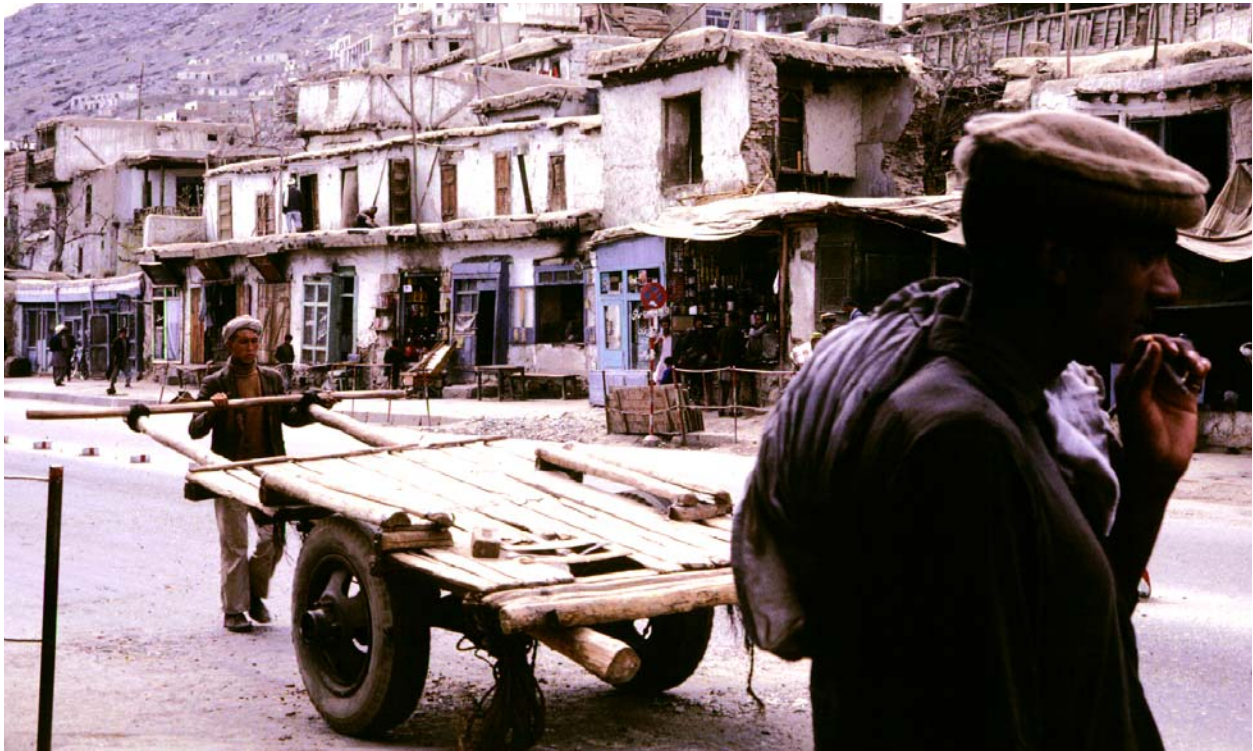
Back to Pakistan. The easy route from Kandahar would have been straight northwest to Iran; but I was set on seeing southern Pakistan, so I headed back eastward, into the mountains and up to the weirdly-named town of Spin Baldak. From there it was a short truck ride across the border to the Pakistani village of Chaman. And in Chaman—O miracle!—I found the upper end of an antique narrow-gauge railway that zigzagged once a day down the mountain to Quetta, Pakistan.

That whole border crossing was spooky. The pass between Spin Baldak and Chaman cut through a deep mountain gorge, bristling with ancient citadels on every peak. There were heavily armed soldiers all over the place. The weather, in November, was cloudy and blowy, with wisps of fog crawling like ghosts over the road. After an unsettling day, it was a relief to descend into the sunny Zhob river valley and find a room at the relatively civilized railway station in Quetta.

1968: Hippie Heaven

Now an old hand at Afghanistan, I breezed through it on my second visit. This trip was west-to-east, from the Iranian city of Meshed across the border to Herat, southeast to Kandahar, and then once more over the mountains to Quetta. Although it was February and the pass at Chaman was still ugly with soldiers, this time the weather was kinder.

Chicken Street. By 1968, Afghanistan had become a hippie destination. In Kandahar I met an American who was buying sheepskin vests



A typical shopping street in Kabul, 1977. After the Americans arrived in Afghanistan, the preferred architecture for a shop became the stolen cargo container.

1977: Closing Down



Baggy pants refuels his truck before we cross the desert border from Iran into Afghanistan. 1968.

for his head shop in Chicago. He talked vividly about the scene in Kabul, its action centered around “Chicken Street”—apparently so-named because of the fried chicken restaurants that had sprung up along it. Everyone who was anyone was flocking there to get stoned on the cheap. It didn’t sound like the Kabul that I knew.

Me and Baggy pants. The border crossing between Meshed and Herat was a hoot. I negotiated a ride in an oil truck, whose driver turned out to be a lively conversationalist even though neither of us could understand a word the other was saying. I dubbed him “Baggy pants” and he seemed to relish the name.

The Iranian customs post at the border was centered around a windowless little concrete bunker, on the side of which was a slot like a letter drop. A hand-lettered sign ordered you to shove your passport in. After several minutes the passport slid silently back out, stamped for exit. It was like a vending machine.

Iranians drive on the right, Afghans on the left. So in the middle of the empty desert stood a

sign, in a dozen languages, advising drivers to switch to the other side. Allah be praised, traffic was light. Baggy pants swerved from the right lane to the left and we barreled onward.

1977: Closing Down

The last time I saw Afghanistan, things were starting to look dicey. The king had fled (though not for good), snogged four years earlier by perfidious relatives while he was partying in Europe. An uneasy republic had been proclaimed, but the Russians were already making hungry noises in the north. A year later the Bear moved in, and overland travel through Afghanistan closed down completely.

My Harem. On this trip I was in the company of three women—Katherine Mitchell (who later became a US foreign service officer), Joyce Hurwitz from Mensa, and my niece, Darcy Skarada. I’m sure most good Muslims assumed that this entourage constituted some sort of harem. As before, my route proceeded southeast

Travel Bumming: Afghanistan

from Herat to Kandahar, but then we swung northeast to Kabul. From there we took a bus over Khyber and down into Pakistan.

We made good time getting to Kabul, which had acquired a cosmopolitan veneer since I had seen it 17 years earlier. Cars were everywhere, signs were in English, and the restaurants served more than just kebabs and *pilau*. It was clear that the hippie tide was still running strong.

Killer Lettuce. After the usual sightseeing, we bought four tickets on the next day's bus over Khyber and decided to treat ourselves to a farewell dinner in the rooftop Speengar restaurant, the toniest place in town. Lulled by the sight of cloth napkins and waiters in suits, we decided to breach one of the travel bum's basic rules. We ordered lettuce and tomato salads.

Big mistake. Extended travel had made my stomach fairly bulletproof, but my companions all fell sick as dogs that night. Later we talked to a Peace Corps volunteer who told us why. Had we eaten our salads at a hole-in-the-wall, the lettuce would have come straight from the fields, unwashed, and it would have been OK. But the Speengar figured that their status required them to soak their lettuce before serving it, so they sent a boy with a bucket down to the open sewer that ran along the street... Anyway, you get the picture.

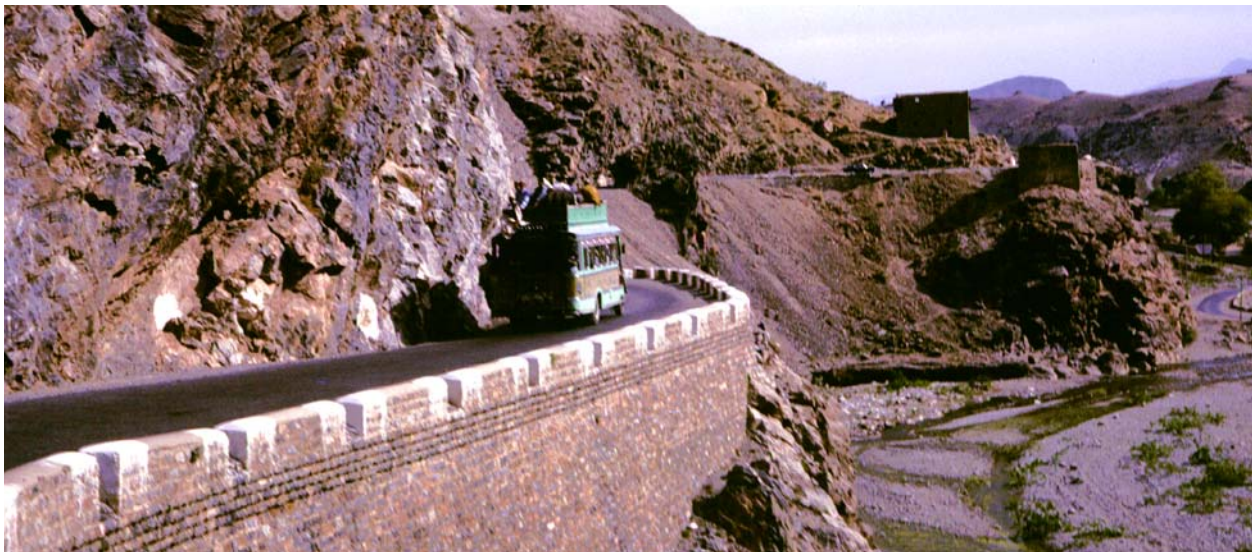
Negotiating with the Big Cheese. Being sick meant we had four bus tickets we couldn't use.

At dawn I showed up at the bus park to get them changed, but the manager stonewalled me. Even though I saw him filling our abandoned seats with new, paying customers, he refused to credit any part of our money toward tickets for the next day. So having nothing better to do, while my harem was spending the day barfing, I decided to make a project of it. I found the Ministry of Transportation and lodged a complaint. Soon I was seated in the office of the top guy, who spoke good English and was in the mood for conversation.

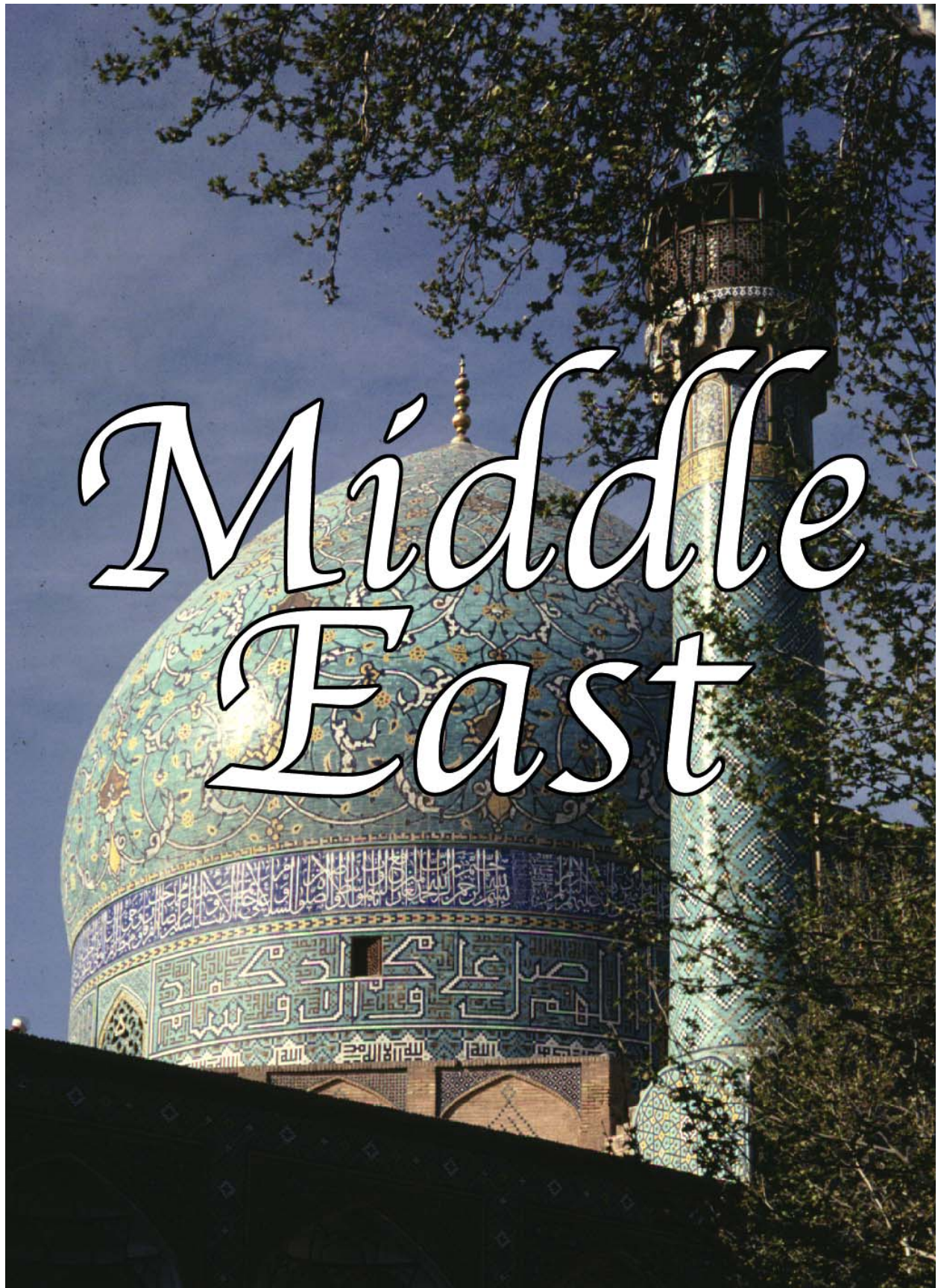
We talked for an hour about this and that, mainly politics, while drinking innumerable glasses of tea. I conveyed my genuine admiration for Afghanistan and assured him that there were worse bus systems in America. Finally he picked up the phone and barked something into it in Pashto.

When I went to the bus station later that day, the manager hid scowling in his office while his chastened clerk handed me four new tickets.

🚲 *My first visit to Afghanistan, in 1960, covered only the eastern half—from northern Pakistan over the Khyber Pass to Kabul, south to Kandahar, then eastward back into Pakistan, crossing the high mountains at the heavily fortified border town of Chaman. This brought me to Quetta, Pakistan, the embarkation point for the weekly train westward through Baluchistan into southern Iran.*



Bussing over Khyber, 1977. The route, which mostly follows the valley of the Kabul river, was lined with blockhouses and fortresses.



Travel Bumming: The Middle East



This curly-coifed Persian warrior was carved in the wall of the 2300-year-old palace at Persepolis, southern Iran. 1960.
Overleaf: The great mosque at Isfahan, Iran. The tilework on Iranian mosques is one of the wonders of the modern world.

A Night in Lahore



Truckers in southwestern Pakistan covered their vehicles with extravagant decorations. Competing for truck-of-the-month? 1960.

WHEN YOU TRAVEL WESTWARD from India, the frontier of Pakistan represents the beginning of 2,000 miles of Muslim territory, which extends until you exit Turkey in the north or Egypt in the south.

After the polychrome pantheism of India, I was intrigued by the austerity of people who built their lives around a single set of absolute beliefs.

In one sense the Muslim creed cut through a lot of complicated explanations; in another sense, it channeled people's thinking in ways that I found stifling.

A Night in Lahore

The northern border crossing between Pakistan and India has always been a pawn in the games played between the two countries. The rules for going through have tended to change frequently and without notice.

Arriving in 1967 on the Pakistani side of the border, I was told that no one could cross without a police permit from Lahore, 50 miles back. It was the sort of bureaucratic pettiness that had



The weekly train across Baluchistan stopped every few hours in the middle of the desert. Suddenly women would appear out of nowhere and climb aboard. 1960.

Travel Bumming: The Middle East

Squatty Toilets

EVERY TOURIST TO ASIA OR AFRICA comes home with at least one horror story about the toilets. It was just a hole in the ground, there was no toilet paper, it smelled, etc. Travel bums take this state of affairs for granted and even get used to hearing the customary arguments for squatty toilets.

When you squat over a hole, it is said, no part of you touches the environment except the soles of your shoes. Although your posture is not ideally comfortable, it trains you to complete your job rapidly and efficiently. This new skill will come in handy when you have to hold your breath the whole time. And if there's no toilet paper, what do you think your left hand is for? (Well, you should wash your hands afterwards *anyway*.)

Swahili has always had a traditional name for the squatty type of toilet: *msala*. When the British came to Kenya and introduced sit-down toilets, the Masai had to coin a new term for the contraption. Entranced by the sound of it flushing, they came up with a beautifully evocative new word: *choo*. Ever afterward, when travel bums heard that there was a *choo* nearby they were suffused with gratitude; for despite all the arguments for the *msala*, a clean *choo* can be a gift from the Gods.

become common in Indian-Pakistani relations, its only effect being a lot of people milling about at the border, wondering what to do.

An American engineer and his wife happened to be there, seeing off some friends; when they heard of my problem they generously offered to drive me back to Lahore and put me up for the night.

A Bit of Free Enterprise. My host had been sent to Pakistan to help one of the ministries upgrade their water system. We had dinner with a colleague, who had been similarly posted to work with the department of electric power. He told us about electric meters in Lahore.

For years each house had been charged a flat fee for whatever power it consumed, but one day the government decided to install meters and read them each month. For a while everything went fine, but soon the readings began to decline steadily, month after month.

Following some investigation, it was discovered that an itinerant craftsman had been going from house to house, offering to reduce electric bills. For ten rupees he would drill a tiny hole in the side of the meter. The householder would insert a wisp of straw through the hole, which would slow down the gears inside. Of course the householder would withdraw the straw each month before the meter reader came around.

The entrepreneur with the drill was eventually found and arrested, and revenue climbed back to normal.



So here I am on my Heehaw rent-a-donkey, exploring the urban scene in greater downtown Dalbandin. Pakistan, 1960.

A Bath in Quetta



A banknote for 20 Iranian rials, also known as one *toman*, worth about 26 cents US. The last time I crossed Iran, in 1977, the Shah still sat firmly on the Peacock Throne. Two years later he fled into exile and travel bumming in Iran shut down.

stowed in the corner. It was doubtless left over from some Victorian *shikari's* expedition, hunting wild sheep in the nearby mountains. The storeroom adjoined the station restaurant, so I cut a deal with the cook. If he would heat water, I would pay him three annas (about two cents) a bucket.

Soon I was sitting naked in my bath while all the women in his family trooped in to pour boiling water over me. They giggled themselves silly, which set me to laughing, so a good time was had by all.

A Bath in Quetta

Quetta, Pakistan, was a pleasant university town, high enough in the mountains to avoid the heat of the Indus Valley. In 1960 I arrived the day before the weekly train across Baluchistan was due to depart and took a "retiring room" at the station.

The British Raj created retiring rooms as a marvelous feature of the Indo-Pakistani rail system. They were simple hotel rooms inside each station, with various classes of appointments. First class usually had a private washroom and a ceiling fan. Second class boasted nothing more than a rope-net bed. Either way you could hang out in relative comfort and privacy, assured that a porter would summon you to your train when the time came. And retiring rooms were cheap.

Bathwater By the Bucket. The only retiring room at the Quetta station, however, was second class. Not only did it lack a wash room, there seemed to be no bathing facilities anywhere. After mucking about in village hotels, I had reached the point where I could smell myself and didn't want to think about my likely effect on others. I desperately craved to be clean.

Rooting about in the station I discovered a storeroom full of junk, including an ancient tin bathtub

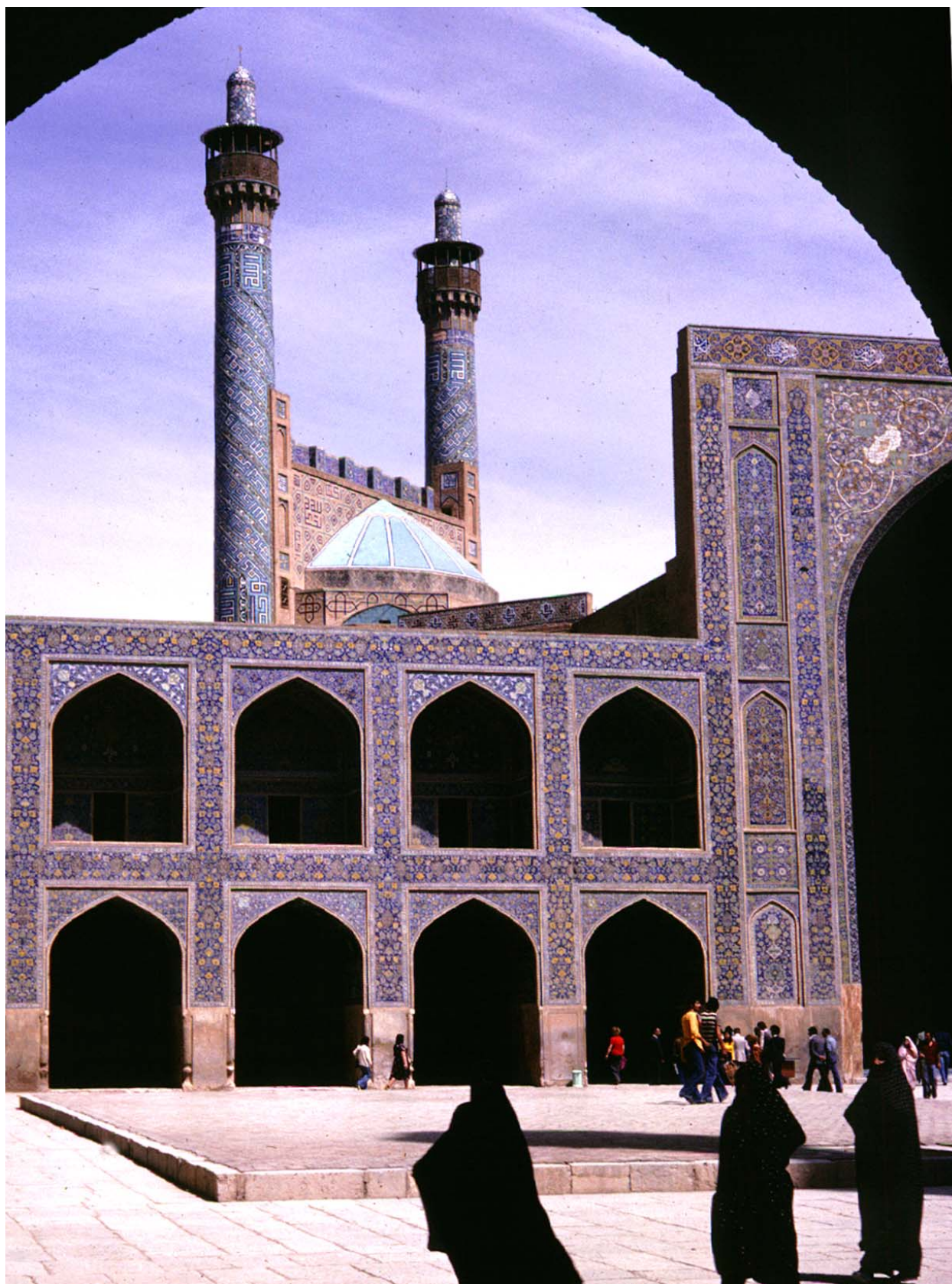
Bumming Baluchistan

There were two other travel bums on the train through Baluchistan that week: Bill Bradley, a history teacher from New Zealand, and Günter Vierow, a West German kid who I later visited in Berlin. Bill had acquired a wicked-looking jungle machete somewhere in his travels, and constantly waved it around his head to the nervous delight of the Pakistanis. Günter snapped pictures, practicing for a career in photography. The three of us found an empty carriage on the train and set it up as a traveling party pad.

The Ladies of Baluchistan. Our train clanked its way across a featureless expanse of black sand. To the north were the mountains



Bill Bradley, fellow travel bum, showed off his machete in the Baluchistan desert.



The great mosque in Isfahan, Iran, 1977. Before the mullahs took over, the majority of Iranian women opted not to cover themselves.

that formed the southern border of Afghanistan; otherwise there was nothing to see. Periodically the train stopped and people trooped up to it, on donkeys, on camels, and on foot, seemingly emerging out of nowhere.

We had heard about the legendary beauty of the Baluchi women, so we took every opportunity to observe them. But except for their being thinner (not surprising, considering where they lived), the ladies of Baluchistan seemed no different from the ladies of Peshawar or Karachi. Beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder.

Tourists in the Desert. Midway between Quetta and the Iranian border the train stopped for several hours in Dalbandin, a dusty village in the middle of nowhere with a fine bazaar but not much else. I hired a donkey and rode it about town, while Bill entertained the local children with close-order machete drill. Günther snapped photos, including one of me on my donkey.

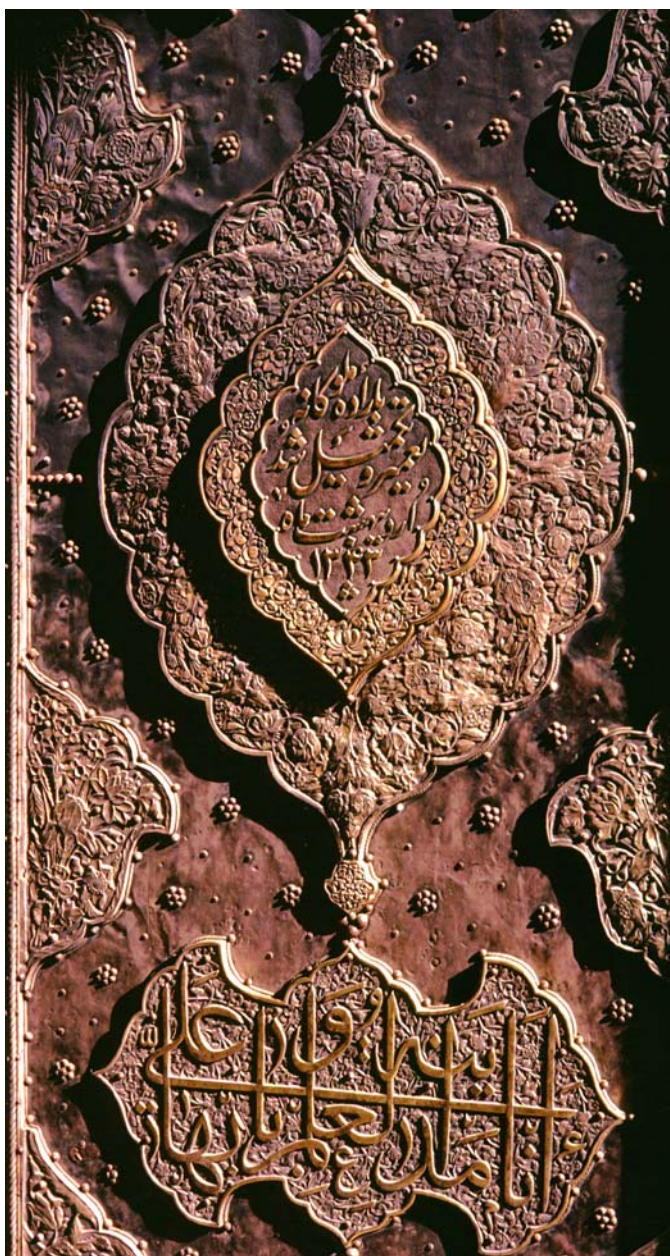
Eventually we became bored and longed for a bit of excitement. In the train station we found the Complaint Book. This object, a traditional feature of the Pakistani railway system, was a large volume with numbered pages that were examined periodically by inspectors from Karachi. Every passenger had a legal right to demand the Complaint Book and inscribe his remarks in it. We decided that here was a grand opportunity for us to exercise our literary skills.

As the station master danced about in anguish, we filled page after page with extravagant variations on the horrors of train travel in Pakistan. "When the train stops, camels stick their heads in the windows and breathe on the passengers." "The pages of the Quetta Times nailed up in the loo are shockingly out of date." And so on, page after page, all illustrated with crude drawings.

At the time it seemed hilarious, but I noted that the whole Dalbandin station crew seemed immensely relieved when they were finally able to chase us back into our carriage and send the train chugging on its way.

Just Deserts in Iran

We finally reached the Iranian border at Noh Kundi, after three days of camping and partying in our private saloon car. Negotiating customs took hours. My six-month vaccination certificate for cholera was dated 10/2/60, which the medical officer interpreted as February 10th. He brought out a rusty needle, proposing to give me a booster shot then and there. Thus more arguing.



A decorated door in Isfahan.

Travel Bumming: The Middle East



A badly damaged winged bull guards the entrance to Persepolis.

But eventually the delay provided its own diversion. Bill had noticed some suspicious dealings among the other passengers and passed a word to one of the customs officials. The official investigated and discovered that a Pakistani's bag of salt was laced with rifle bullets. After hauling away the culprit, the official became expansive. "Next time you come through," he told us, "carry anything you want. There will be no search." In his eyes, this *laissez-passer* was the ultimate reward.

Thanksgiving in Bam. "Yes, Virginia, there is a Bam." Thus began one of my letters home, in response to insinuations that the city of Bam, Iran, was something I had made up. As a matter of fact, I spent Thanksgiving Day, 1960, in Bam.

It wasn't much of a town—basically, a mud village guarded by an ancient mud citadel. But I was feeling a bit homesick and needed to create a holiday mood. In the bazaar I found a can of Zwan, a Dutch lunch meat. Christening it turkey, I sat on a box along the main street and started eating my Thanksgiving dinner.

Suddenly a military band appeared like magic from a side street, wheeled smartly, and marched past me. They struck up "Dixie." *I wish I was in Dixie, Hooray, Hooray*, blared the trumpets. Thump! thump! went the bass drum. Tears rolled down my cheeks as the band strutted past, wheeled again, and disappeared down another street. To this day I haven't the faintest idea what occasioned that gratuitous blessing. But who says that God does not grant favors to the travel bum?

Poetry on the Bus. Thus fortified in spirit, I embarked on a series of day-long bus trips westward across the dusty desert of southern Iran. It was roughly the route that Alexander took when he retreated from India. It was during those days that the idea of writing this book first entered my head. I also whiled away some of the



An earlier, and more prominent, travel bum left his mark on the ruins at Persepolis, Iran.

Just Deserts in Iran



Kneel, Roman dog! Emperor Valerian surrenders his arms to the Sassanian king Shapur I in this 3rd century relief near Firuzabad, Iran. The Persians always personified their politics: our guy can beat up your guy. In this case it was wishful thinking.

time by composing song lyrics. One verse, to the tune of “Gloccamora,” still rings in my head:

*How are things in southern Persia?
Does the native bus still leave at three?
Does the woolly sheep still travel there
For half a fare,
While chickens travel free?*

It must have been the desert heat that inspired more doggerel in the same vein—including a song whose chorus ran “*I took a shahr in Khorram-shahr and a bath in Bathlehem*”—but these sparks of poetic creativity have, fortunately, been lost.

The Tiles of Iran. Muslim tile work was the glory of southern Iran. In Shiraz and Isfahan the great mosques overwhelmed you with their intricate patterns of blue and green. Qum too; but there you had to sneak around, for much of the Holy City was off-limits to infidels like me.

Shiraz, indeed, came close to getting on my list of Favorite Places. The traditional home of the poets Hafez and Saadi, it was a broad, leafy city, filled with gardens. In the days of the Shah, before the thin-lipped mullahs took over, you

could even buy bottles of the famed Shiraz wine there.

The Shiraz bazaar was large, labyrinthine, and exotic. One dim, winding passage led you to a dungeon-like grain mill where a camel plodded forever in a circle, pushing a grinding wheel. The poor beast was blindfolded “so he’ll stay quiet.” A parable, I suppose, for our hard-working industrial age.

The Wealthy East. Although OPEC existed during the 1960s, it didn’t throw its financial weight around until 1973. Oil was still \$2.50 a barrel, a subsistence price.

Even so, several small sheikhdoms around the Persian Gulf were getting rich. One of them, Kuwait, had become a travel bum destination. The word was that if you were big and beefy you could get casual employment from the oil companies there. Alternatively, if you were weak and skinny, like me, you could sell your blood, which required hardly any effort. The princely sum of \$125 a pint was mentioned.

I never seriously considered going to Kuwait to sell blood, but one story would have turned

Travel Bumming: The Middle East

me off anyway. A Canadian kid, said the travel bum grapevine, had passed out while giving his pint. The medics, seeing that he was not in a position to object, proceeded to drain the rest out of him. His desiccated body was found the next day, dumped in an alley. Well, it sounded possible at the time.

Ripped Off. On the road to Tehran, just north of Shiraz, the Iranian sitting next to me on the bus extracted my passport and traveler's checks from my pocket. At the time it seemed like a major disaster. If I had caught the guy who did it, I would have tried major surgery on him with my bare hands. Fortunately I was able to make it to Tehran on the cash in my other pocket and encountered no policemen demanding papers.

While my new passport was cooking at our consulate, I went to the Anglo-Iranian bank to get some money. The manager had traveled a bit, so we sat down to test my *bona fides*. After I correctly identified some of the buildings on Nob Hill (the Fairmont, the Mark Hopkins, the Pacific Union Club), he happily cashed my check for \$300 drawn on the Oakland Bank of Commerce. That financed me as far as Cairo, where American Express replaced my traveler's checks. After that incident, of course, I learned to carry everything inside my shirt.

Living It Up in Tehran

Friends of friends had invited me to stay with them in Tehran when I passed through there in

1960. Ken was an economist attached to our embassy; he lived in an upscale expat suburb with his wife, Lynn, and their three sons.

During the taxi ride to their house the driver got lost. When we arrived he loudly demanded an extra *baksheesh* for his trouble, but he fled as soon as the family's Labrador emerged barking from the compound. Good dog.

When the family first arrived in Tehran, Lynn had promptly signed up for night school to learn enough Farsi to communicate with the servants. Meanwhile, their five year old son had become fluent in a couple of weeks. For a while, whenever a problem arose the servants would tell the kid. He would translate to Mommy and then relay back the necessary orders. Because he was a male, and the servants were women, this arrangement worked fine.

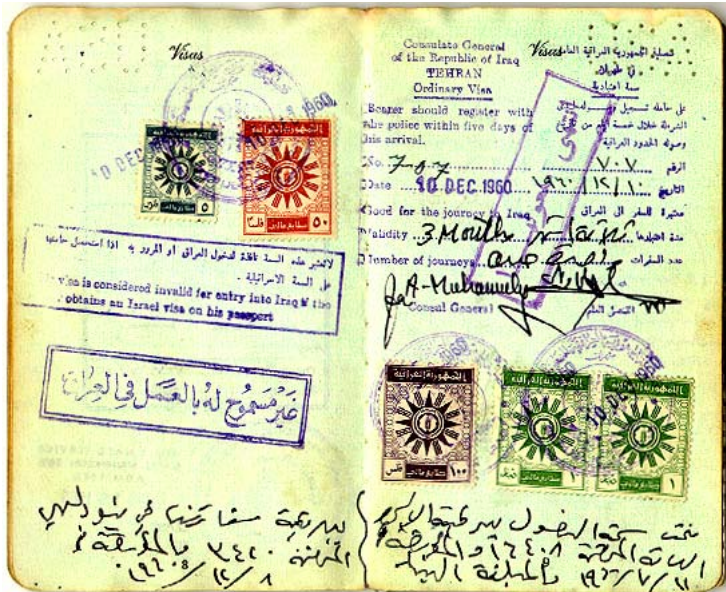
Banking As She Was Done. One day I accompanied Lynn while she went to the bank for a week's supply of cash. She wrote a check for 10,000 rials, was handed a pack of 100 new 100-rial notes with the bank's paper band around it, and plopped the pack in her purse. Having done a bit of business in the Middle East, I asked if she wasn't going to count the bills. She pointed to "100" written on the paper band. I suggested we count the bills anyway, as an experiment. There were 98. She indignantly returned to the teller's window and he promptly handed her two more bills, without comment.

Caviar to Die For. In Tehran I acquired a taste for caviar that has never left me but has not since



American cuisine comes to southern Iran. Shiraz, 1977.

Iraq and Roll



My visa for Iraq. Notice that a special stamp invalidates it if I obtain an Israeli visa in my passport.

been satisfied either. It was Ken's practice to venture forth at night into the back alleys of the city, scoring kilos of black-market caviar direct

from the fish. The stuff was of the best quality, unsalted and absolutely fresh.

Coming home from school each day, his kids would pull the huge tin from the fridge and spoon the caviar out. It was a habit I happily fell into, and the rich, buttery flavor has stayed in my memory to this day. Later I heard that when his family returned to Washington, and caviar was obtainable only by the ounce, Ken had to wean his kids to less ruinous fare. But since those days in Tehran I have never been able to recapture the full sensation of that savory indulgence, not even in Russia.

Iraq and Roll

Much of the border between Iran and Iraq is mountainous, home to the formidable Bakhtiari people. But in the south the two countries face each other across the Shatt-al-Arab, a broad waterway that drains



My companions on the two-day desert trip from Baghdad to Amman. The cocky kid in the center was deeply into smuggling. 1960.

Travel Bumming: The Middle East

The Orient Express

THE ORIENT EXPRESS of Agatha Christie fame was portrayed as a luxury train that left Constantinople for Paris and got stuck in the snows of Serbia. That train was actually the Simplon Orient Express.

The true, original Orient Express ran between Paris and Bucharest for 78 years, from 1883 to 1961. It touched at Munich and Vienna, but it didn't go near Istanbul. In 1919 a southern route was inaugurated using the Simplon tunnel, which had been opened a dozen years earlier. It ran through Venice, Belgrade, and Sofia to Istanbul. From there an extension, the Taurus Express, carried travelers to the Middle East, terminating at Basra, Iraq. This version of the Orient Express ran until May, 1977. I took one of its last runs through the Balkans in February of that year.

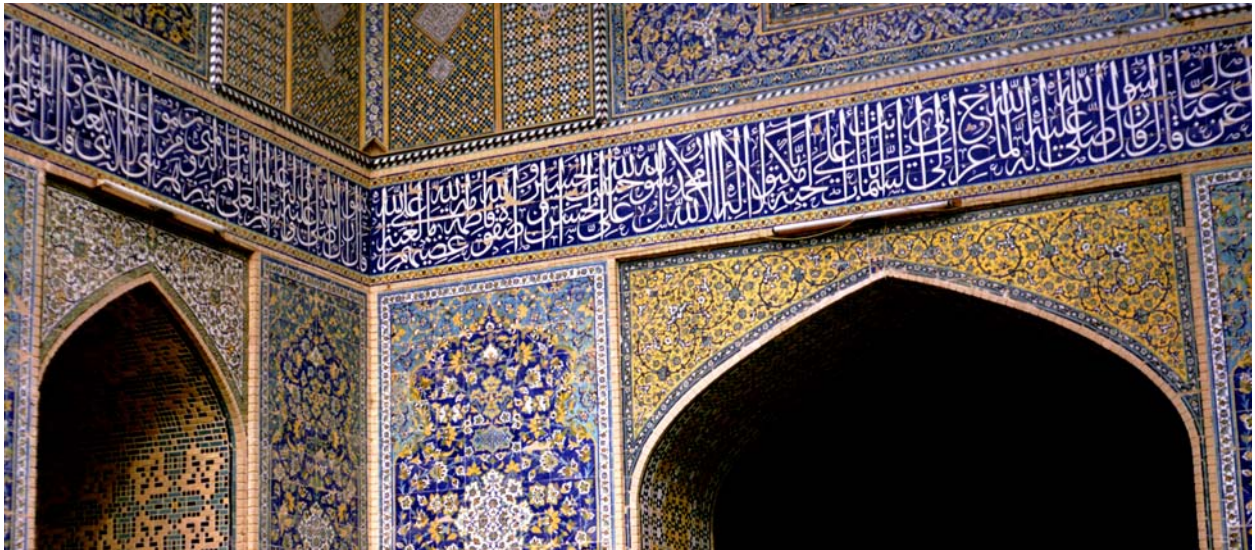
In 1982 the Simplon route was revived as a luxury experience, trading on the mystique of the old train and its new Hollywood fame. The old carriages were rounded up and refurbished, and waiters were hired to dress in costume. For \$12,000 you can book a compartment on this train today, from Paris to Istanbul, but it's obviously no longer a travel bum thing.

the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into the Persian Gulf. I took an overnight train from Tehran to Abadan and went down to the waterfront, looking for a boat.

After bargaining all morning, a fisherman accepted 100 *tomans* (about \$26) to putt-putt me across to the Iraqi customs post at Seeba. The trip took an hour and required dodging several large supertankers passing to or from the oil depots upstream. It's hard to appreciate how huge those ships are until you skinny under the bows of one of them in an aluminum motorboat. From Seeba I hitched a ride to Ma'qil, the deep-water port for Basra.

A Beautiful Train. In more elegant times, Ma'qil had been the eastern terminus of the Taurus Express, which extended the Orient Express train service into Asia. It was a vital part of the way that Victorian travelers went overland to India.

You started from Victoria Station, London, accompanied by a suitable encumbrance of hatboxes and steamer trunks. After a brief hiatus crossing the Channel, you steamed via Paris, Milan, and Belgrade to Constantinople (modern Istanbul). There you rested at the sumptuous Pera Palas hotel, perhaps enjoying a Turkish bath. Suitably renewed, you took the early morning ferry across the Bosphorus to Haydarpasa, embarkation point for the train to Aleppo, Baghdad, and Ma'qil. At the Ma'qil dock lay



The interior of the mosque at Isfahan is as glorious as the exterior. Each little element of the Arabic inscription was a separate tile.

Iraq and Roll

the connecting P & O liner bound for Bombay. Presto! England to India in two weeks.

Arriving overland at Ma'qil in 1960 gave me the complementary experience. At my tumble-down hotel I had met a German kid who was running out of money and had saved just enough to buy a train ticket home to Frankfurt. He was leaving at 7 p.m. so I went to the station to see him off.

There on the track stood the proud blue Wagon-Lit carriages. Through the brightly lit windows of the restaurant car I could see immaculate nappery, gleaming silver, a rose in a bud vase on each table. In the sleeping cars, stewards in smartly pressed uniforms were turning down snowy white sheets.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I realized that the money in my pocket would buy me a place inside this marvel of civilization—would in fact transport me in ineffable comfort all the way to London. A little voice in my head cried *Take the easy way!*

For a moment I imagined myself enveloped in snowy white bedsheets. But I still had places to go, things to see. Not for me the shortcut.

So the train rolled away in a cloud of smoke, like a magic carpet turning to fantasy. I bought bread and boiled sheep in the marketplace, then trudged back to my tumble-down hotel.

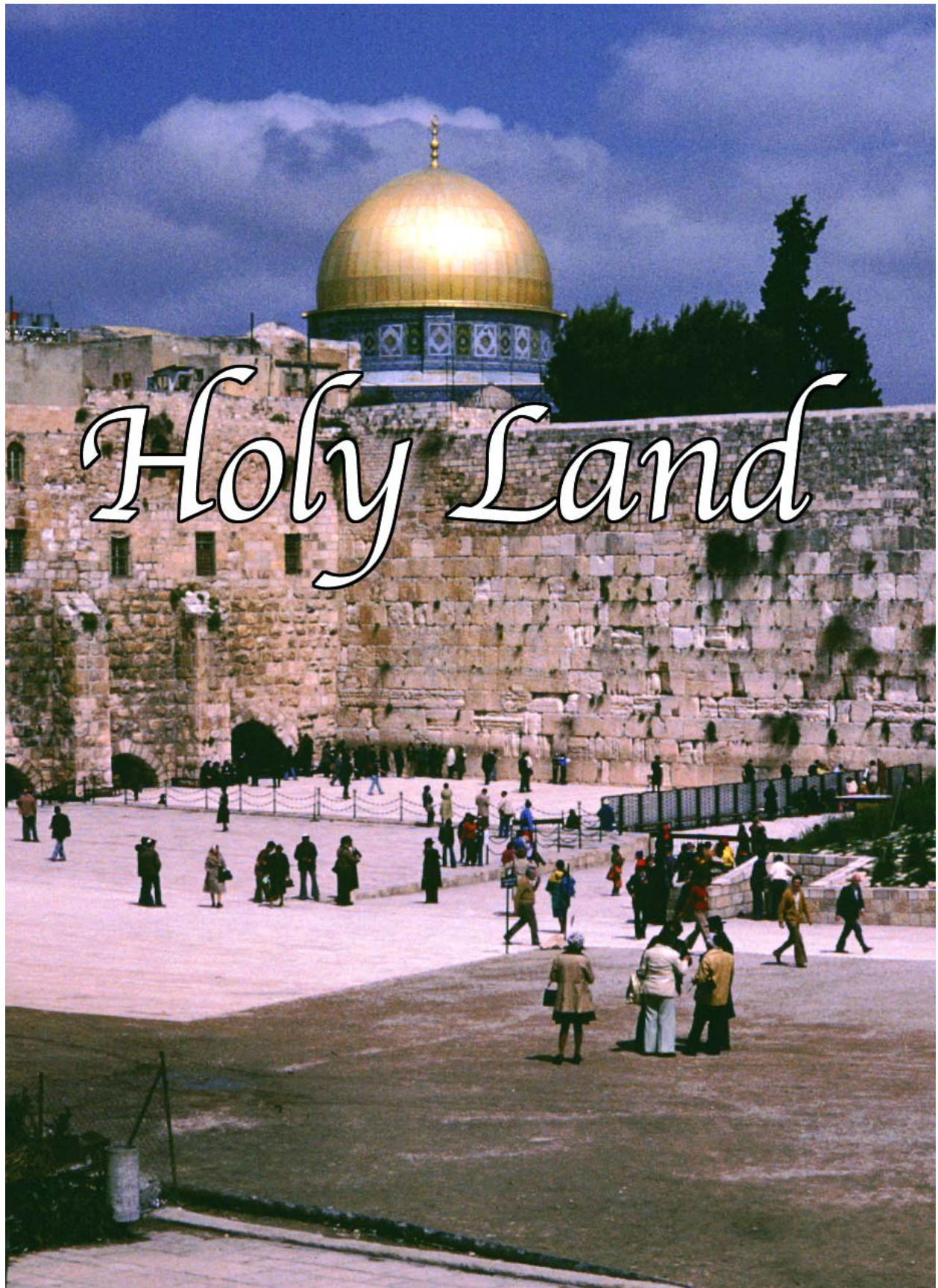
🚲 *One of my goals when going around the world westward in 1960 was to spend Christmas in Bethlehem. December 15 found me in Baghdad, from which 500 miles of desert road ran to Amman, Jordan. Since then, of course, a good bit has happened in that part of the world and the road is no longer just an empty ribbon of asphalt laid through featureless hardpan. But in those days, busing it was an adventure. The trip took two days with an overnight stop at Rutba, where rusting truck carcasses had been welded together to form a kind of hotel.*

My companions on the bus, a bunch of rough-hewn Baghdaddyos, seemed to be engaged mainly in smuggling. One of them carried twenty wristwatches up and down his arms. He was careful to keep his sleeves buttoned up as we approached the Jordanian border.



Two of my "harem," Darcy and Katharine, at a restaurant in Kuwait. Uncovered Western women were a treat for Kuwaiti men. 1977.

Travel Bumping: The Middle East





Gigantic Corinthian columns thrust into the sky at the Roman ruins in Jerash, Jordan.

Overleaf: The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, with the Dome of the Rock in the background. While Jerusalem was under Muslim control Jews didn't have access to the Wall. After 1967 they could pray there, facing the Wall, and place messages in its cracks. 1977.

Christmas in Bethlehem



I enjoyed two days of spectacular and fulfilling scenery along the road across the Western Desert from Baghdad to Amman. 1960.

ON ENTERING JORDAN, at a desolate outpost in the bleak Western Desert, the Baghdad bus was inspected by soldiers of the Arab Legion, who seemed to emerge out of the sand dunes. The smart-looking men of the Camel Corps, draped with bandoleers of ammunition, wore distinctive red-and-white *kaffiyehs*. Still under the spell of Sir John Bagot Glubb, otherwise known as Glubb Pasha, they formed a welcome bit of late Victorian dash in an otherwise drab and featureless scene.

I checked into a hostel in Amman and went round the next morning to the American consulate, on Jebel El-Lweibdeh, to get my mail. Gad! The Stars and Stripes were fluttering upside down on the flagpole, an international signal of distress. I pointed the flag out to the duty officer, who exclaimed, "Damn that Mahmoud, never gets it right!" He scurried off to have the flag turned around.

Christmas in Bethlehem

In 1960, Bethlehem and Jerusalem were both firmly inside the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

I had an introduction to friends of friends—Tufic and Nasri Saca, brothers who practiced law in Jerusalem. They invited me to stay in their large stone house on a hill overlooking the Bethlehem road.

From an upstairs window, on a clear day, you could see Israel. The two brothers spoke good English and their housekeeper, a motherly lady from Lebanon, spoke French.

A History Lesson. The brothers were not angry at the Israelis. They deplored the border problems—"In the old days we would drive down to the seacoast every weekend"—but they felt that coexistence was acceptable. Life went forward and business was good.

We kept up a sporadic correspondence after my visit; but in 1967, while I was living in France, Tufic sent me one last letter. During the short "Yom Kippur War," his brother had been killed by a stray bullet crashing in through the living room window. The Israelis were demons, they had to be annihilated, and it was all America's fault. *Please do not try to communicate with me again.* Thus, in microcosm, I became



This silver star in the crypt of the Church of the Nativity is supposed to mark the exact location of Christ's birth. 1960.

acquainted with the nature of the Palestine-Israel problem.

Christian Wrangling. But back in 1960, all was still cool. Nasri wangled me a highly prized ticket to the midnight mass on Christmas Eve at the Church of the Nativity. The church is one of the oldest and most sacred in Christendom, and every part of it is the jealous possession of one or another sect—Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, etc. When a window gets dirty, it can be washed only by the sect that “owns it” (or the dirty side of it), lest another sect acquire “rights of custom” to wash that window. Getting down to cases, Catholic mass on Christmas Eve involved an elaborately choreographed ritual of rights and permissions that had been going on for centuries.

No Room in the Crypt. The mass was long and solemn, but at midnight it suddenly picked up steam. As the choir burst forth in Hallelujahs, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem lifted a manikin of the Christ child from the high altar. Everyone formed a procession behind him—I fell in behind the Belgian ambassador—as we wound down to the crypt beneath the church. On the

floor of the crypt was a fourteen-pointed silver star that was supposed to mark the exact place where Christ had been born.

The idea was to lay the manikin on the star, thereby memorializing the Savior’s birth. But surprise! The Orthodox Greeks were holding a service in the crypt that very night, as was their ancient prerogative.

On the stairs the aged Catholic Patriarch, cradling Baby Jesus in his arm like a football, met face-to-face with his equally venerable Greek counterpart. The two argued for half an hour, using phrases that had been honed over centuries as the identical scene took place every year. Finally the Greek Patriarch stepped aside, saying something like “Well, OK, just this once but definitely not next year,” and the Christ child (now wiser about the future of His church) was carried down and deposited on the floor.

The Rose-Red City

While in Jordan I went down to Petra, the “rose-red city half as old as time.” The train trip was interesting; it ran on the rails that Lawrence of

The Scene in Israel

Arabia assiduously worked to blow up during the summer of 1916, and the skeleton of a Turkish locomotive still lay rusting beside the track.

I rented a donkey for the ride from Wadi Musa into the ruins. Threading a narrow defile through high rocks, we suddenly burst into the silent city, all carved out of the sandstone cliffs. Over the years, however, many architectural details had been damaged by Turkish gunners who imagined that they might have been hollow and filled with treasure.

While clambering over the monuments I ran into a young American couple who were honeymooning in the tourist hotel. Nine months later they wrote me that they had just had a baby girl. I suggested they name her Petra.

The Scene in Israel

From the moment that Israel came into existence, her Arab neighbors tried to block her tourist traffic. If there was any mark in your passport showing that you had visited Israel, countries like Egypt and Syria would deny you entry. Even Israel's helpful offer to stamp their visa on a separate piece of paper didn't help, for the exit stamp from an Arab neighbor could be a tell-tale.

The Allenby Two-Step. So it wasn't until 1977, on a trip to Jordan, that I found a way to see Israel without endangering my travel privileges elsewhere in the region. As a result of the Six-Day War, the border between the two countries had moved eastward to the Jordan river, but the government of Jordan was trying to pretend that it hadn't. To cross the river on the Allenby bridge, one applied to the Jordanian Ministry of the Interior for a permit to visit "the West Bank district of Jordan," although this piece of real estate was now actually the eastern end of Israel. Nothing appeared in your

passport because the Jordanians had decided to act as if you were not really leaving Jordan.

At the other end of the Allenby Bridge, the Israelis gave me and my backpack a thorough going-over, including probing my toothpaste tube. They took me into a little blockhouse and made me photograph the ceiling, to demonstrate that my camera was really a camera and not a bomb. One of the soldiers joked that it was the second-most photographed ceiling in the world, surpassed only by the Sistine Chapel.

I spent a happy week roaming Israel, and could in fact have flown anywhere in the world. When I walked back over the Allenby bridge, the Jordanians smiled and pretended I had never left their country.

Kibbutzing Around. It was fortunate that I was able to stay with friends in Tel Aviv, because prices in Israel were out of sight. At their sug-



A street in the old city of Damascus, 1960.



A calf nursery at Kibbutz Naan in Israel, 1977. Their dairy operation was modern and immensely well organized.

gestion I went to Kibbutz Naan, near Rehovot, a place very popular with foreign kibbutzniks. Even now, people who worked there in their student days hold “Naan reunion” parties all over the world. The kibbutz ran a dairy operation and manufactured irrigation systems, pursuing both businesses with scientific vigor.

The atmosphere in Israel in 1977 was palpably different from the typical lackadaisical Arab milieu. Everybody seemed to be doing something or going somewhere. The air in the cafes was electric; nobody was just standing around. And the Israelis obviously had good reason to be busy—coming from Jordan you could see the hulks of burnt-out tanks strewn beside the highway. Just staying alive in Israel seemed to be a full-time job.

The Bible as Baedeker

Jerusalem has been a destination for travel bums at least as far back as the Crusades. Even Mark Twain made it a primary goal of his bumming in *Innocents Abroad*. So I made it a point to go there

in 1960 and again in 1977. It was the tourist city *par excellence*.

I think the reason for Jerusalem’s popularity is the quality of its 2,000-year-old guide book. As I strolled the streets of the Old City, I could find a reference in the Bible to almost every location. The temple of Solomon, the Way of the Cross, St. Luke’s “street which is called Straight”—they were all there, many marked by little ID plaques in the stone walls. When it came to authority, the Good Book had it all over Fodor’s.

The Dome of the Rock. Jerusalem is holy to Muslims, as well as to Christians and Jews—a fact that has led to a world of trouble. In 1960, when the city was part of Jordan, the great Al-Aksa Mosque was a busy place. Pilgrims of all faiths trooped under its huge golden dome to see a stone outcropping called, simply, the Noble Rock.

The Noble Rock did double duty. For Muslims it was the launching pad from which Muhammad ascended into Heaven during his Night Journey. For Jews it was the Foundation Stone and the place where Abraham prepared to

The Bible as Baedeker

sacrifice his son Isaac, a story told in *Genesis* 22. An outcropping of buff-colored sandstone can't get much more prestigious than that.

The actual Rock was cordoned off by a wire fence. But as I circled its perimeter, I spied a little sliver of it that had fallen away and tumbled through the fence. I took this event for a sign and put the fragment in my pocket. Perhaps I hoped that some of its ancient power would rub off. If not, I trust that Muhammad and Abraham will pardon me anyway.

A Visit to Golgotha. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre sprawls over the alleged location of the Crucifixion and Christ's tomb. At first glance a gloomy and labyrinthine pile, it nevertheless seemed to me charged with spiritual energy. When I first saw the church in 1960 it was under Muslim control and fairly quiet. But in 1977, with the Israelis in charge, it was filled with energetic priests who escorted visitors to the various stations inside.

I watched an elderly lady in a black shawl tottering after one of the priests, trembling

visibly as she walked. She seemed to have come from Eastern Europe, and it was clear that this was the trip of a lifetime for her. When the priest guided her hand through a hole in the floor to touch the ground underneath—earth on which Jesus was thought to have bled and died—she collapsed in a flood of uncontrollable weeping.

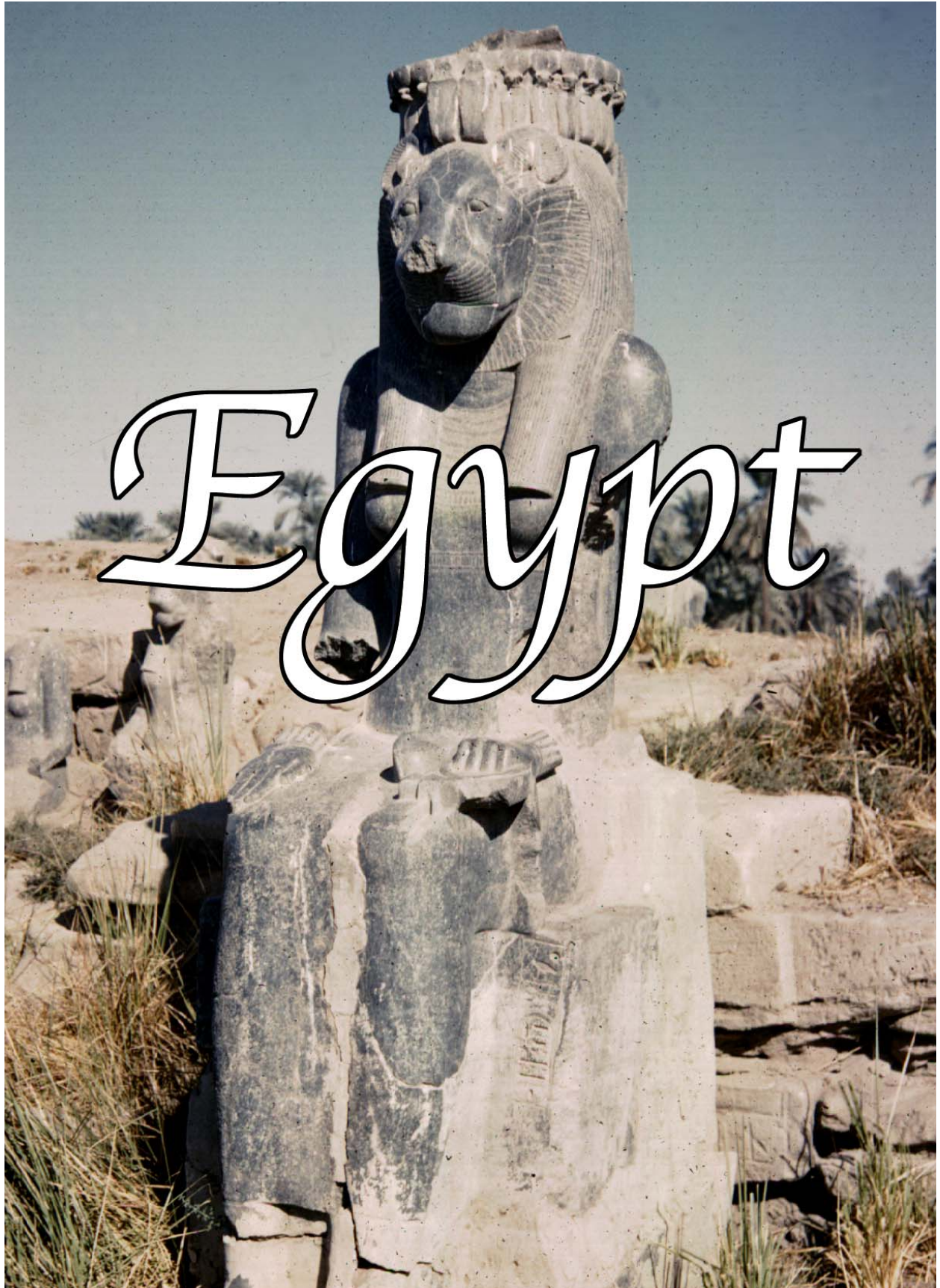
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem apparently suffered from the same disputes over ownership as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, various parts of it being jealously claimed by the Catholics, Greeks, Armenians, Copts, and so on. It seems that the holier a Christian site, the more it brings out the worst in the various Christian sects.

🚲 *When Christmas, 1960, was over, I found myself dog-tired by two months of desert living and short rations in the Middle East. So I decided to get me down to the fleshpots of Egypt. I took deck passage on a boat south, from Beirut to Port Said, and holed up for a week in Cairo.*



A view of Tel Aviv in 1977. It was a fat city, especially compared to most Arab burgs, but hotels and restaurants were expensive.

Travel Bumming: The Holy Land



Travel Bumming: Egypt



My wife-to-be, Danielle, sitting on a Pharaoh's chair at the Temple of Luxor, 1985.

Overleaf: An unfinished statue of Pasht, the cat goddess, sitting alone in an XVIII-Dynasty junkyard near Luxor. 1961.

Slumming in Cairo



A fresco in one of the royal tombs; Valley of Kings, 1961. The colors have held up pretty well during 3,000+ years.

EGYPT IS A GREAT PLACE to hang out. It offers a full range of Western luxuries but it is also filled with fascinating sights. I traveled up and down the country in 1960, 1977, 1981, and 1985. The last visit was with Dany, and it was in Luxor, up the Nile, that we decided to get married.

Slumming in Cairo

In Jordan, after I had crossed the Iraqi desert in 1960, an American kid drew me a little map to the “German pension,” the latest haven for travel bums hanging out in Cairo. It was in Faggala, a seething slum but also a district noted for its ancient Christian churches—Armenian, Coptic, and Catholic.

Years later, at a party, I met a woman who had lived in Cairo; when I told her I stayed a week in Faggala she edged away from me as if I was permanently unclean.

Living with Nuns. Faggala was an easy reach by streetcar from downtown, where I was negotiating

with American Express to get back the traveler’s checks that had been filched from me in Iran. The streetcar didn’t stop in Faggala; it merely slowed down to let passengers leap on and off. It was then that I learned not to jump off a moving streetcar while facing backward; at the same time I also learned how to clean an inch of Cairo slum muck off the seat of my pants.

The pension was run by German nuns, who had discovered how to create entire dinners out of nothing but *kartoffeln*: potato soup, potato salad, a main course of potatoes *au gratin*, and potato pudding for dessert. But the rooms were clean, and in the mornings one awoke to the engaging combination of *muezzins* calling for prayers and roosters crowing from the rooftops.



A sign in the bazaar in Aswan, 1977. Perhaps a forerunner of Al-Jazeera?



All these happy, friendly Egyptians were anxious to line up to have their picture taken. Luxor, 1985.

The Floating Youth Hostel. Before the nuns' operation had become popular, travel bums in Cairo had migrated to the famous "Floating Youth Hostel"—King Farouk's yacht, which had been seized during the revolution, tied up at the foot of Kasr el Nil street, and converted into dormitories. But the hostel now sat on the bottom of the river. A British kid at the pension told me what had happened.

It was a typical Egypt story. An electrician had been hired to install lights; he was drilling down from deck to deck until Surprise! the Nile! Instead of disturbing anyone, however, he had quietly packed his tools and gone home, while the water bubbled in through the last hole he had drilled. The next morning at six, an Egyptian appeared in the dormitory and announced, solemnly, "The youth hostel is going down." Sure enough—there was water sloshing in the stairwells, and just after everyone had scrambled onto the dock the boat had quietly disappeared.

Inside the Pyramid. Tourists who go to Cairo head for the Pyramids, a short bus ride out of town. And there, on the Gizeh plateau, is one of

the heaviest concentrations of beggars, touts, and souvenir hawkers anywhere on the planet.

When I first saw it in 1961, the pyramid of Khufu could be climbed. I rejected the offer of a wiry young Egyptian, who proposed to carry me on his back for a couple of dollars, and spent the next hour laboriously clambering to the top over the three-foot granite blocks. On my way back down I essayed the journey inside, into the burial chamber.

Part of the route into the sanctum had been excavated and was fitted with steps and hand rails. But part of it consisted of a stone tube, about three feet square, through which you crawled. It was through this tube that the dead Pharaoh's body had been shoved five millennia ago. When I finally popped out in the burial chamber, roughly in the center of the pyramid, I felt well and truly entombed. Just a little earthquake, a shifting of the stones, and *my* body would have been safely stored away for the next five millennia.

Keeping Healthy. In Cairo I treated one of the few health problems I've had as a travel bum—a painful bacterial infection in my upper

Food and Water

STAYING HEALTHY is an essential requirement of travel bumming. And the primary key to health is prudence about food and drink.

The basic rule when I was travel bumming was to avoid consuming live critters. Cooked food was OK, as was any drink made by boiling. Fresh foods taken from their natural wrappers were good—eggs, nuts, bananas, oranges, etc. It was even worth taking the trouble to peel a tomato.

And it was usually safe to eat anything canned or bottled, as long as you were sure that the container had not been fooled with. But smart travel bums stayed away from the uncooked outsides of anything—lettuce, grapes, figs, even dates.

Micropore water filters came on the market just in time for my 1984 Africa trek. They revolutionized the travel bum's access to clean water. For \$30 you got a filter cartridge, a hand pump, and some tubing, weighing about two pounds altogether. As you vigorously pumped the handle it forced local water through the filter, straining out anything bigger than a virus. "Squeezing water" for the next day became a nightly and very useful ritual.

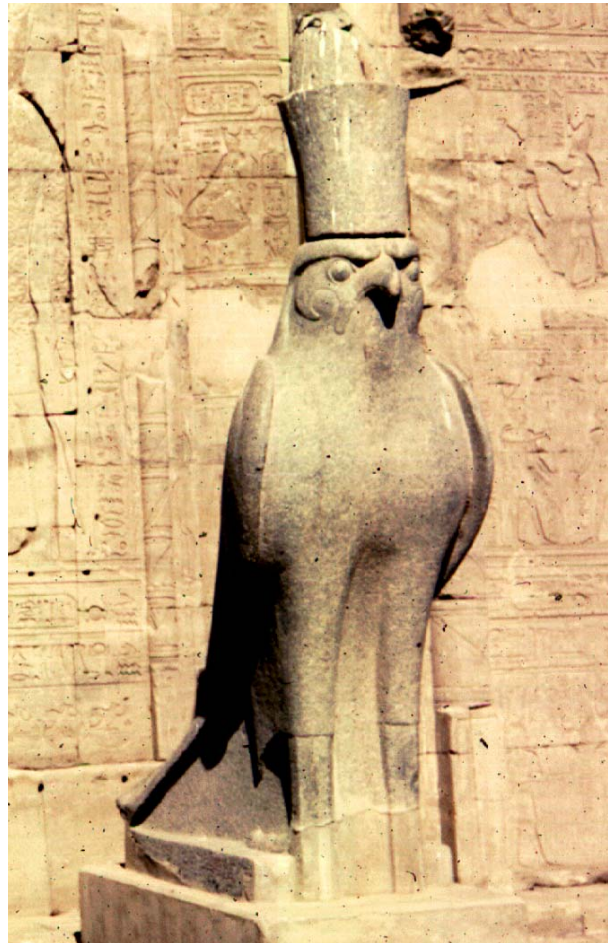
sinuses. An English-speaking doctor figured out which antibiotic to apply and a pharmacy dug out the ampoules from a box of miscellaneous stuff. With the nuns giving me two shots a day, the problem soon disappeared. My notebook records that the whole course of treatment cost me eight dollars.

In this I was luckier than a German kid I met, who told me how he had come to spend two weeks in an Egyptian hospital. For breakfast one morning he had gone into the marketplace and bought a melon, after carefully hefting various candidates to see which was the juiciest. It turned out that the juiciest melon got that way because the melon vendor had jabbed a straw into it and filled it with Nile water.

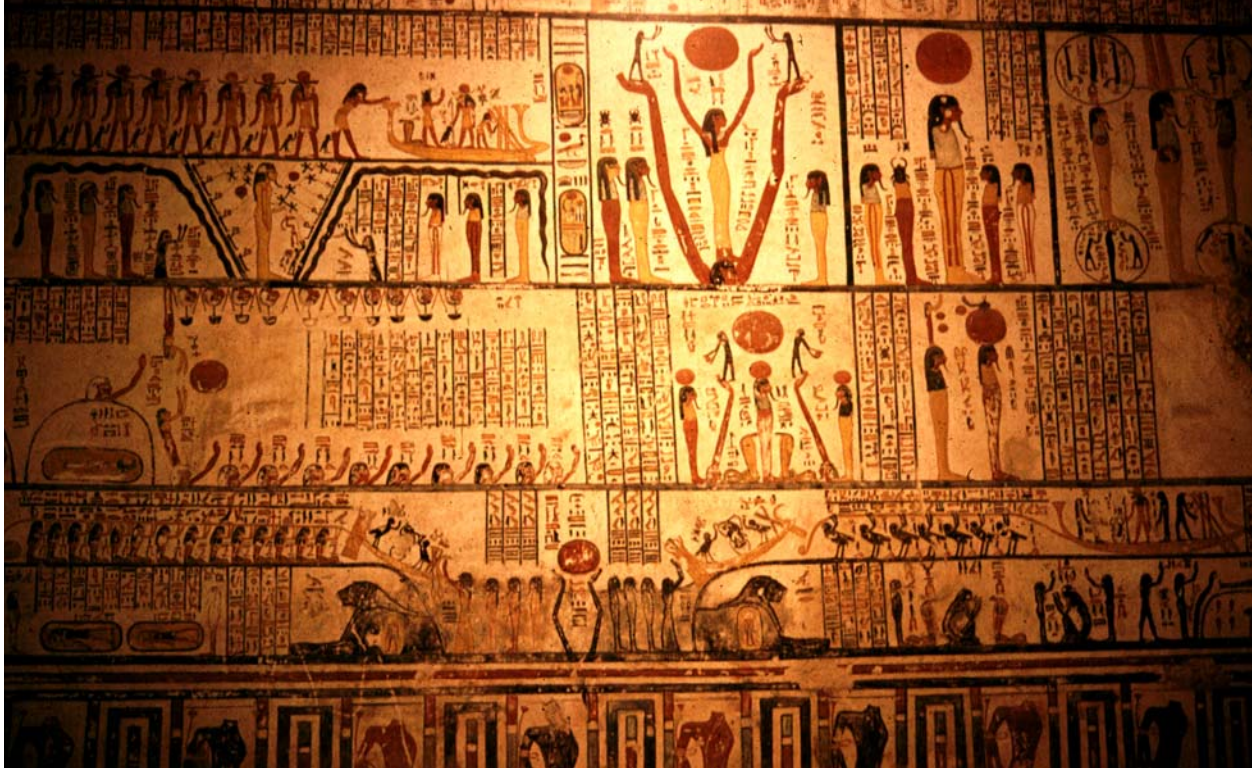
Off to the Tombs

At the nuns' pension I met Tex, a six-foot-two American who wanted to go upriver to Luxor. We were anxious to dine on something besides potatoes, so we bought train tickets and left the next evening.

Excitement Up-River. In India I had become accustomed to traveling second class, laying my sleeping bag out on the broad luggage rack and snoozing happily above the tumult and the animals. Tex had been traveling in better style, but when I promised him a unique experience he readily agreed to go along. He was not disappointed, for about two am some seedy-looking ruffians came running through the carriage, followed by police firing their pistols into the roof. To fully appreciate the scene, you must experience the sound of a .44 magnum going off



Horus, the hawk god, stands tall outside the temple at Edfu.



The fresco in the tomb of Thothmes III. I was taking this photograph when the lights went out. Valley of Kings, 1961.

in a closed railway car. Tex just couldn't thank me enough for broadening his horizons.

A Frugal Shortcut. Once in Luxor, Tex and I immediately headed for the Valley of Kings. The normal route was to cross the river by ferry and then, at the landing-stage, take a tourist bus about five miles to the tombs. But this involved bus tickets and entry fees, an expensive luxury we felt able to forgo. Looking at the map, we discerned a shorter route, following a mule track over the hill behind Queen Hatshepsut's temple. It was not only more direct but avoided the bother of paying the ticket-taker at the entrance to the Valley.

So we set out by foot, and after tarrying at various monuments along the way we arrived in the afternoon at the royal tombs. It was nicely timed because the last tourist bus had left and we were, at that moment, the only visitors in the Valley. Of course the officials did not know we were there; but in our ticketless status we did not feel it necessary to arouse them.

Trapped in the Mummy's Tomb. The tomb of Thothmes III was the deepest and most intricate in the Valley. It began with a long staircase

at ground level, which descended through a (modern) steel door into a labyrinth of false passages. In a further attempt to confuse robbers, the original builders had dug an enormous pit, which one crossed on a swaying catwalk. The final chambers were some 400 feet below ground. At the time we were there, all this was illuminated by a string of electric bulbs powered by a gasoline-driven generator.

So Tex and I tripped gaily down the passages, following the dimly glowing bulbs to the innermost room, the royal sarcophagus chamber. We were enjoying the frescoes there when the lights flickered, dimmed, and went out.

Later we realized that the Egyptians, thinking their last customer gone, had simply shut down the generator and were preparing to go home for the day. But at a moment like that, one abandons prosaic explanations. We tried frantically to recall if the guidebook had mentioned any curses connected with that particular tomb. We held our breaths, listening for the rumble of a sarcophagus cover sliding off. Do you smell balsam, like a mummy wrapping being unwound? I imagined what I would

Sheikh Ali Abdul Rasool

do when the bony hand fell on my shoulder. Pass out, most likely.

After a while, our wits cleared and we contemplated getting out of there. Of course we had no matches or flashlights, and retained only the faintest recollection of which branches and turnings we had taken on the way in. Finally, we edged along the wall of the tomb chamber until we reached an opening. We felt our way down the stone passages, shouting into each side branch to determine by the echo which were dead ends and which were open corridors. We crossed the catwalk on hands and knees, feeling rather than seeing the chasm below. From time to time we were able to reach up to a warm bulb on the ceiling, reassuring us that we were on track. After forty minutes of groping our way through absolute darkness, we saw a faint glow coming down the long staircase to the surface.

We arrived at the steel door just as the guard was coming to lock it for the night. He laughed his ass off. He didn't even think to ask us about tickets. I'm sure he enlivened his entire village with our story that night.

Tex and I traveled together as far south as Aswan. After that day, however, he insisted that we buy tickets for all the antiquities. A few years

later I went to his wedding in Carmel. He must have told his bride about our adventure, because she made it clear that if they ever went to Egypt together, she would insist that they stick to a guided tour.

Sheikh Ali Abdul Rasool

The youth hostel in the town of Luxor was well located and reasonably clean, but the word among travel bums was that the place to go was Sheikh Ali Abdul Rasool's place in the village of Bahrah, across the river. So in 1977 and 1981 that's where I stayed.

The Sheikh Is [In]. Was he a real sheikh? Rumors abounded, but he certainly acted like one. Tall and regal, he plodded slowly about in a great embroidered robe, a huge gold tooth gleaming from the front of his mouth. He was particularly gracious to women travelers, bestowing on them beaded necklaces and ceramic *ushabtis* "just dug up from the tombs." He must have bought those things by the bushel from a factory in Luxor.

His *caravanserai*, a crumbling assemblage of mud brick, embraced a spacious garden where Sheikh Ali held forth in the evenings. Relatives



The boy standing on the wheel whips the emaciated cow, which causes the pots to lift water out of the ground. Luxor, 1961.



A pharaoh receives potency from the great god Dong in pre-Viagra Egypt. 1961.

and hangers-on wandered in until the place resembled a tribal council. The Sheikh, if that he was, moved in procession from table to table, flashing his gold tooth and graciously receiving homage.

The Hot Water Game. As a hotel keeper the sheikh was a sly old rascal, good at sizing up your financial condition and adjusting his rates accordingly. One dusty day I checked in with him, wanting desperately to get into a nice warm shower. As we passed the shower room he pointed to the boiler; "Hot water," he declared, "as you wish." A few minutes later I was back in there, naked, trying to get other than freezing (and rusty) water out of the taps. Finally I pried open the door of the boiler. Its

coils had been taken out years ago, and the firebox was filled with broken dishes.

Meet the Little Woman. At Sheikh Ali's I got to talking with a local businessman, who had parlayed his profits from a string of taxis into something like a landed estate in one of the villages west of Luxor. He invited me to see his house.

It was the usual mud brick affair, but his living room was unique. Somewhere he had acquired a set of six huge French Empire armchairs, gilt with blue upholstery, which pretty much filled the tiny room. We sat in them and drank tea, but there was no place left for a table to put your glass on.

Presently a muffled black shape sidled into the room and sat on the floor in the corner. It was his wife. This started my friend expounding on his "progressive" views toward women. He took down a small metal box from a shelf and showed me its contents—bits of costume jewelry, a small roll of money, some photographs.

"This," he explained proudly, "is her property. She can do anything she wants with it." He wanted me to understand that he was not your typical unenlightened Arab male.

During this time his wife neither spoke nor moved. Had I not seen her come in, I would have thought there was a pile of black laundry in the corner. Eventually she rose and sidled out of the room.

The Money Game. Like much of the Middle East, Egypt followed its own rules in business. For example, the fare for the 15-minute ferry ride across the Nile from Luxor was marvelously flexible. Tourists new to the game were charged anywhere up to 20 piasters, but after a few trips you learned that the customary rate was two piasters for foreigners, one piaster for Egyptians.



A mosque in Khartoum, Sudan. 1981.

One evening, catching the last boat across, I saw a little boy crying on the dock. A man told me that the boy had lost his piaster and couldn't get home that night. So I gave him a coin and he ran happily up the gangplank. But he was stopped by the fare-taker, who had been watching the whole drama. Alas! Because the money came from a foreigner, the boy's fare that trip had to be two piasters. I was obliged to cough up another coin.

North From the Sudan

In March, 1981, Martha Johnson and I found ourselves in Nairobi, ready to head north to Egypt. Until the late 1970s it had been possible to take trains and buses through Uganda to Juba in southern Sudan, there to pick up the slow Nile steamboat down to Khartoum.

This was the classic "Cape to Cairo" route, part of which I had followed in 1965. But Idi Amin's 1971 takeover of Uganda, plus assorted tribal uprisings on the upper Nile, had clobbered land transport. We wound up flying into Khartoum.

Martha and I kept a joint diary during the trip from Khartoum northward to Aswan. Our daily entries read like a kind of anthropologist's record of daily life among the travel bums.

Tuesday 3/17—Khartoum

George: "Preparations for travel tomorrow. Transaction in souk: Changed \$60 cash for 57 Sudanese pounds at a jewelry stall. Bought 12 oranges, 6 tomatoes, half-kilo dates, bag of shelled peanuts, total 4.70. Two plastic jerry cans for water, 3.00. Train tickets to Wadi Halfa 18.20 each, plus 32.60 for 2-bed private compartment."

Bargaining

"MONEY ANSWERETH ALL THINGS." So sayeth *Ecclesiastes* and so discovereth the travel bum. Virtually everything you do—eating, sleeping, traveling—must be paid for.

But in the Third World, and even at times in the First World, the amount you had to pay could be quite flexible. Although the price of bananas might be posted in the marketplace, that figure was often intended only as a starting point for negotiation. Thus bargaining was always one of the primary skills of the travel bum.

Bargaining for everything might seem tedious and uncongenial to people who had grown up in our list-price society. But in other cultures it was often a gratifying social process. Sellers expected to bargain and might feel unfulfilled if you refused to play the game.

On the other hand, travel bums could get excessively caught up in bargaining. When I was living in France in 1968, the teenage son of a friend came to visit and we drove down to Florence. He was new to the idea of paying for everything and had become intense about it. At the post office he tried to bargain down the price of a stamp; then, when we reached the Vatican, he refused to pay 200 *lire* to see the Sistine Chapel, claiming that it was "only worth 150." This was something that Pope Julius might have said, but only as the opening ploy in a bargaining session with Michelangelo.

Martha: "George went to the train station ticket window at 7:30 am. He was told Wednesday was sold out and we would have to get the Sunday train. (There are two trains a week.) Relieved of the need to rush about madly, we went to the market (*souk*) and bought water containers. As I walked back to the Oasis Hotel (expensive, but aptly named—they have Pepsi and glasses of ice!), George went to the train station and bought our tickets. This time they said Sunday was full, Wednesday was not, so we had to leave the next day after all. How typi-

cally Sudanese. At 5:00 pm when the worst of the heat was past, we walked back to the *souk* and bought food for the trip. We also picked up mail at the Post Office. I got a letter!"

Wednesday 3/18—Khartoum to Abu Hamed

George: "Train scheduled to leave at 6:30 am; actually left at 8:15. Consists of 17 wooden carriages; first class has padded seats. Compartment has folding wash basin which soon runs out of water. Route along Nile past archaeological site of Meroë, with stops at Shendi, Atbara, and Berber, of slave-market fame. Expenses: Taxi to station, 1.00. Tip to man who found taxi at 6:00 am, .25. Mutton-rice lunches on train, 2.20. Bread and tea at stations, .70."

Martha: "The train was a nice one. Outside, the scene was desert with low, dry-looking brush. At the stations food vendors wandered by, as well as goats, who munched any debris tossed out the window. We met a delightful retired Canadian named Doug in the next compartment and were befriended by a big, outgoing Sudani. Saad is married to a German woman and they live in Germany. He was traveling on business and helped us greatly. We learned to order tea without sugar—*chai bedoon sukrah*. Sometimes we wished we could order *chai bedoon chai*, it was so strong."

Thursday 3/19—Abu Hamed to Wadi Halfa

George: "Train route leaves the Nile, cutting across the Nubian Desert. Landscape looks like the moon. When we open the windows we get choked by dust; when we close them we fry. Choking seems preferable. At 5:00 pm the Nile reappears and we steam into Wadi Halfa. Scramble for beds at the Nile Hotel. Martha is spared the horrors of the women's quarters. One-hour lineup for cold-water shower. Clean again! Expenses: train breakfasts (nearly inedible), 2.00. Tea and misc., 1.00. Donkey cart from station to hotel, .65. Two beds, 2.20. Delicious local fried fish, 1.00."

Martha: "During the night, the scene changed to flat, flat land with no vegetation, only an occasional rock. All our stops were at stations with no names, just numbers. When we arrived at Wadi Halfa, we couldn't get on the boat because Customs was closed. Saad took charge and booked us all into one room at the Nile Hotel,



The home of a haji in Aswan. Muslims who have been to Mecca often decorate their houses with a record of their trip. 1961.

the only 'hotel' in town. For dinner we had some very tasty and delicately fried fish wrapped in Arabic newspaper (purchased by Saad). I ate lightly as I didn't want to use the outhouse-type toilets any more than necessary."

Friday 3/20—Wadi Halfa to Abu Simbel

George: "Spent morning clearing Sudanese Customs. The *S.S. Ashorah Ramadan*, a 400-ton flat-bottomed river boat, left at 2:00 pm. Our first class cabin is at deck level; second class is above, under the cabin roof; third class is in the hold. An additional third class barge is lashed to the starboard side. Luckily, our cabin is on the port side. Nice views of the Nile and a chance to do some laundry. Boat tied up at nightfall just above Abu Simbel. Expenses: two tickets to Sadd El-Ali with two-berth cabin, 10.40 each. Land Rover from hotel to jetty, 2.00. More fried fish, boat food, tea, etc., 3.70 total."

Martha: "Arising early, we packed up and rushed over to the boat ticket window and Passport Control. Saad was a great help again, as the few signs were in Arabic. Passport Control had a separate window for non-Sudanese. This cate-



Transport from the train station to the hotel in Wadi Halfa. 1981.



The Colossi of Amenhotep III, across the Nile from Luxor. In Greek times the statue on the right could be heard to moan as wind blew through the cracks in its stones. As a result it was thought to be a statue of King Memnon, later dubbed the "Scorpion King." 1961.

gory included many Egyptians so it had what I call an Indian-style queue, where everyone jams around the window and pushes madly. This bothered Doug and me more than it did George, but eventually we learned to defend our position with our elbows and got our passports stamped for exit. The boat was nice except for the toilet (common 'facilities'). Showers had only cold water, but it was so-o-o good to be clean again. I had not 'showered' at the 'hotel' the night before."

Saturday 3/21—Abu Simbel to Sadd El-Ali

George: "A pleasant day chugging down Lake Nasser, tying up at nightfall a few miles above the High Dam. Captain gives rocks a good bash when tying up; hope they don't let him near the dam itself. Egyptian immigration formalities on boat—usual madhouse. Expenses: Boat food to supplement last of provisions, 4.20."

Martha: "The boat started up at 12:15 am. Why did it stop last night? We came up with different theories. Saad said it stopped to get bread. George thought the captain wanted a good dinner and/or a romp with his girl friend.

Anyway, we roused up in time to view the temple at Abu Simbel, which was dimly visible by the light of the full moon. Then it was back to bed for a good night's sleep. In the morning Doug returned to his cabin after breakfast and found his Sudanese cabin-mate had invited six friends into the small room. They were playing cards on his bed, eating food and throwing orange peels and other debris on the floor. Mild-mannered, courteous Doug went into a towering rage and threw them all out. Things got quite exciting with much yelling as the Sudanese argued and explained in Arabic."

Sunday 3/22 Sadd El-Ali to Aswan

George: "Morning spent on Egyptian health inspections, including fumigating the boat with everybody on board. Lunch at jetty: fish-rice and real Seven-Up! First train not until 4:00 pm, so shared a taxi into Aswan. Back to civilization, somewhat. Expenses: Lunches, 300 Egyptian piasters; taxi seats, 200. Heavy bargaining here, requiring much *piaster resistance*."

Martha: "We arrived at the dam this morning. It took forever to get everyone cleared through

The Hazards of Bumming

the one health officer, but we finally got off the boat. Saad got us all fed and then we taxied to town. Saad took the train to Cairo and Doug, George and I went to a hotel in Aswan. Beautiful view, dirty room, clean bed. Altogether this trip has been one of the most delightful parts of our travels. The scene itself was interesting all along and it had the added ingredient of truly congenial traveling companions."

The Hazards of Bumming

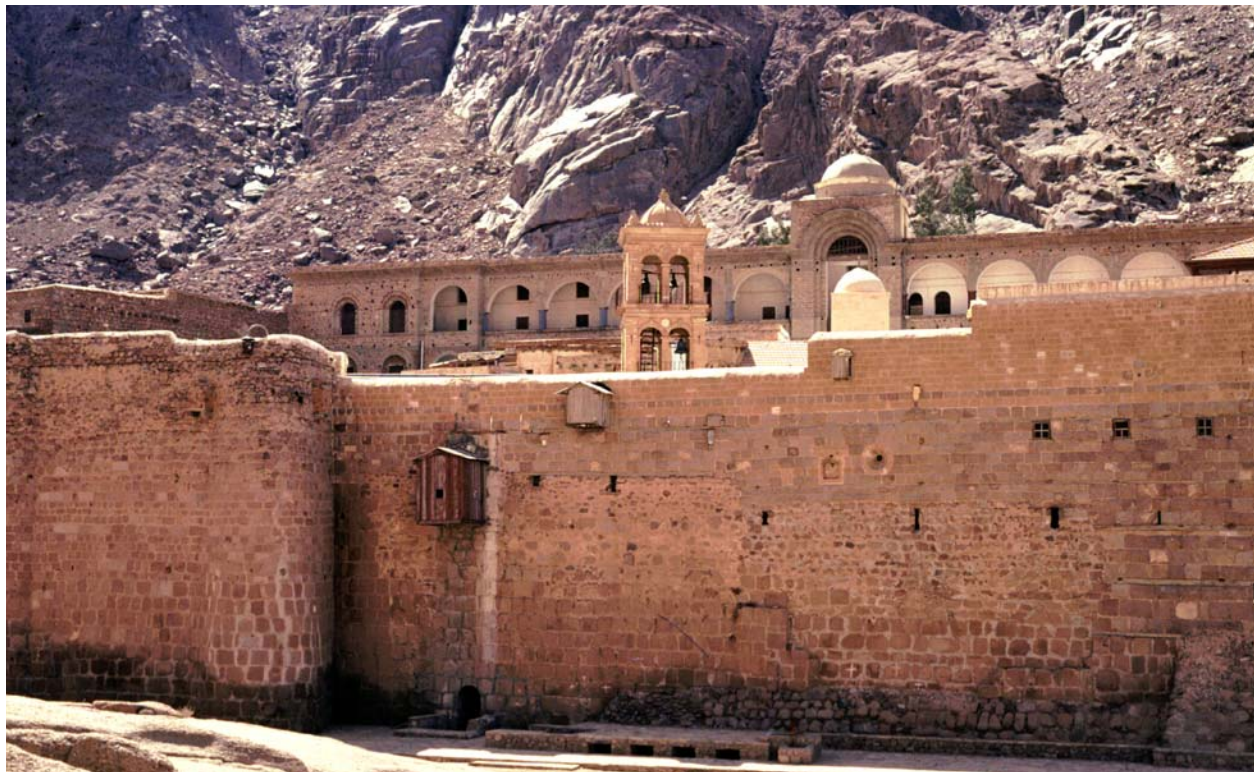
In the pre-dawn hours of May 25, 1983, the S.S. *Ashorah Ramadan*, the boat on which Martha and I had traveled 26 months earlier, exploded and sank in deep water not far from Abu Simbel. Of the 599 passengers and 28 crew, 325 managed to save themselves; 302 perished from drowning or crocodile attacks. The passenger list included 547 Sudanese, 48 Egyptians, 1 Tanzanian, 1 Chadian, 1 Frenchman and 1 New Zealander.

It makes you think. The *Ashorah Ramadan* carried no life boats; if it had, they would have been impossible to launch through the barge full of third-class passengers that was lashed to its

side. There was no emergency drill, and I do not recall any mention of life jackets. The fire-fighting equipment, if any, was invisible. The crew ran the boat and Allah took care of the passengers.

In American terms, such a situation would have been intolerable. But in the Sudan it made a sort of sense. By packing the maximum number of people into the cheapest possible boat, they made transportation affordable. Our first class cabin berths cost about eleven dollars each; the barge passengers (who also had the best chance to escape) paid about two dollars. If they had built the boat to our standards, half of the passengers would have been unable to travel; they would have either stayed in their villages or found an even more dangerous way to travel.

Figuring the Cost. How much did the lost lives cost? One can estimate that during its ten-year life the *Ashorah Ramadan* carried some half a million passengers. Of these, 302 died. If the proprietors had done it "right," the third class ticket price might have been \$40 instead of \$2; each life saved would thus have cost about



St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai. Instead of being hoisted into the wooden box you now enter through the archway below. 1985.

Travel Bumming: Egypt

\$60,000. The Sudan doesn't have that kind of money to spend.

Would I travel that way again? One chance in 1655 of getting killed may seem like short odds, but you probably do no worse driving across the US. There is something to be said for going along with the majority—and if Allah decides to sink my boat, who am I to argue?

Pilgrimage to Sinai

I had met Dany in the fall of 1984, while she was vacationing in the Bay Area with Paul and Madeleine Gregson. After she returned to Paris, I reflected on our good times and proposed marriage over the transatlantic telephone. She suggested we get together and talk about it *tête-à-tête*.

So I arranged for us to meet in London and bought a couple of plane tickets down to Cairo. In London we took rooms at “my club”—the National Liberal—and I made a reservation at the Winter Palace in Luxor, high on my list of great old colonial hotels.

We went up the Nile by overnight train, but this time I booked a first-class sleeping compartment with its own little lavatory, instead of my usual second-class sleeping bag routine. After all, she hadn't agreed to marry me yet.

Off to the Desert Again. While we were in Cairo, doing the Pyramids and other sights, it occurred to me that then was a good time to see Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula. Israel had given the Sinai back to Egypt in 1979 and regular bus service was available eastward. So we went down to the bus station in Cairo and booked a day-long trip over the Suez Canal and into the bleak desert.

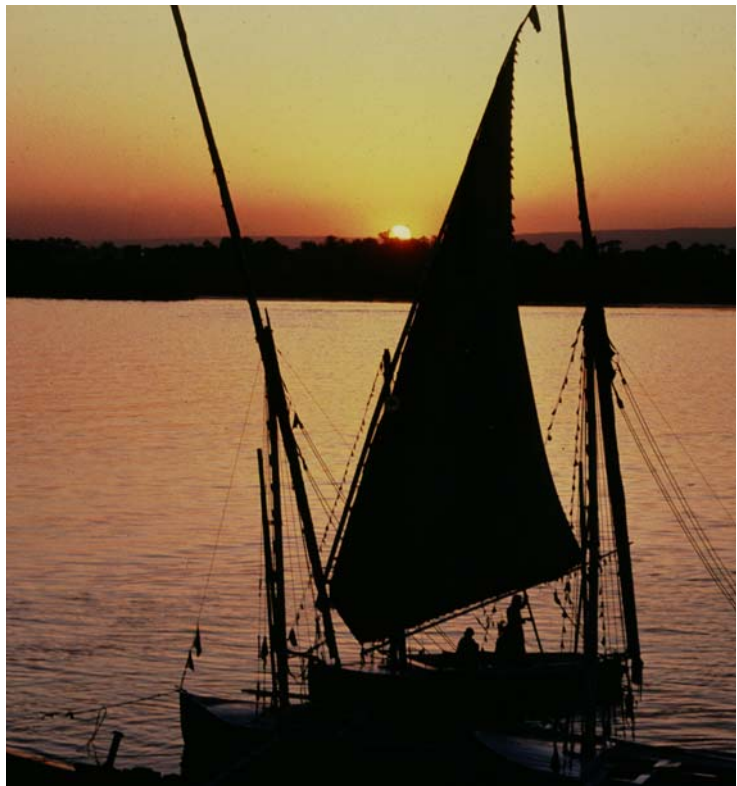
The monastery, protected by high walls, was located in the middle of nowhere, allegedly on the site of the burning bush of *Exodus* fame. If you were persuasive enough you might talk the monks into hauling you up the wall in a basket, but most people went in through a little rat-hole. Inside, the

place was a treasure house of art—Greek, Russian, Islamic, you name it.

We stayed at the motel-like tourist hostel and hiked around the area a bit. But except for a few camels, there was nothing but empty desert outside the monastery. The monks who moved there 1,500 years ago had truly wanted to get away from it all.

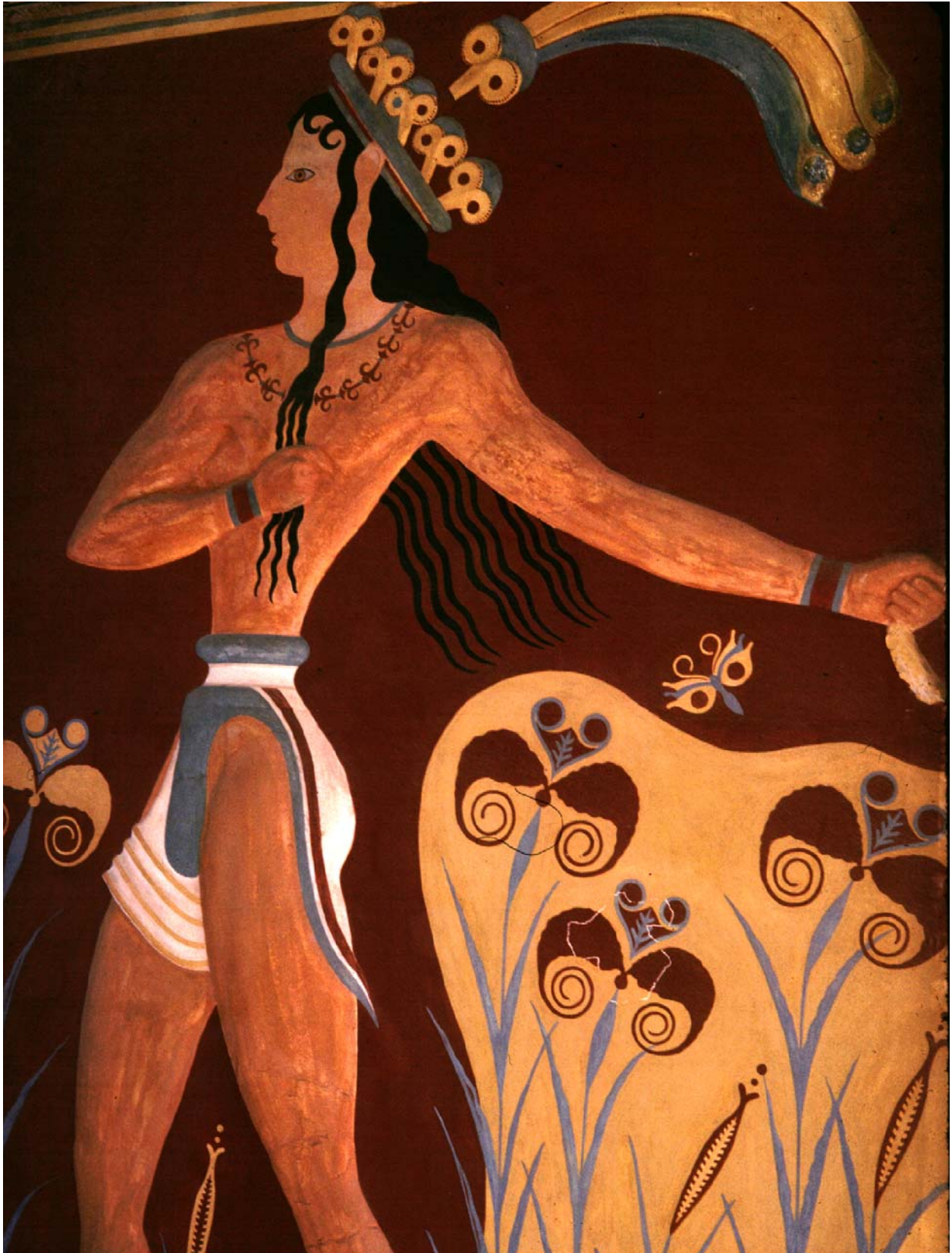
Anticipating that getting married might put a crimp in my travel bumming, I treated this trek into the Egyptian desert as a last fling of sorts. Later, of course, Dany and I did quite a bit of traveling together, so maybe the travel bum virus was contagious.

🚲 *On my first visit, in 1961, Egypt delivered everything I expected. However, after two months in the Middle East I was becoming weary of living among Arabs. The rancid smell of the marketplaces, the whangly-jangly music, the street hustlers settling on you like flies, the diet of greasy kabobs—I longed for something quieter and more familiar. So I took the bus to Alexandria and booked deck passage on a boat to Greece.*



Sunset over the Nile. Luxor, 1985.





This painting in the palace at Knossos, Crete, was as fresh and vibrant in 1981 as it was 3,500 years earlier.
Overleaf: The ruins at Delphi, a magical place. 1961.

Mediterranean Misery



I'm glad I was able to see the Parthenon in 1961. What with pollution and all, it's been going downhill ever since.

LEAVING EGYPT IN 1961 required a bit of strategy. I had entered the country carrying a transistor radio—a cheap thing, but the customs officer in Suez had written it into my passport anyway. So I couldn't leave without either showing the radio or paying duty on it. The problem was that the miserable thing had been filched from me in the Luxor youth hostel.

Thus a diversion was called for. After buying my boat ticket for Greece, I lounged around the pier in Alexandria until the gangplank was being unhooked. Then I shouted wildly for customs to process me out. Sure enough, they hustled me through the gate and onto the ship, which was already beginning to move, while barely looking at my papers.

Mediterranean Misery

The weather in Alexandria had been balmy, even though it was the end of January. There was not a cloud in the sky. So I figured to save some money by taking deck passage to Greece. For two days, and the night between, I would luxuriate under the soft Mediterranean sky, gently lulled to sleep by the rocking of the ship.

Big mistake! We had hardly cleared port when the sky clouded over. A freezing wind blew up. It started drizzling, then raining, then hailing. The ship pitched six directions at once. The two-day voyage began to stretch into three. The Egyptians aboard staggered out of their cabins and threw up all over the deck—my deck. The wind howled as bits of undigested *couscous* sloshed over my shoes. I began to understand the meaning of the phrase “died of exposure.”

My Life as a Dog. Cold, wet and miserable, I finally sought out the deck steward, waving a wad of Greek drachmas. He surveyed my bedraggled state and took pity. All the cabins were booked, but he knew just the thing. He led me to an empty dog kennel under the forward stairs and I gratefully crawled inside. When we finally docked in Piraeus, the sun had come out and I danced ashore to the glory that is Greece.

Fat City

Athens was the beginning of civilization for me, as it was for the Western world. I rioted in the streets, ricocheting from one plate of *mousakka* to another. In my hotel room I lay on a bed with

sheets and a real pillow. I gazed at the Parthenon and drank in the Byzantine museum. After the Middle East, everything seemed luxurious.

A Cold-War Mystery. While in Athens I had to go to the Bulgarian legation for a visa, preparatory to taking the train to Sofia. It was a small building in a park-like grounds surrounded by a high wrought-iron fence. I arrived early in the morning and found the gate ajar, so I just walked in.

There on the front steps of the legation lay a man—short, swarthy, dressed in slacks and an open-collar shirt—writhing in some sort of fit. Not to be deterred, I stepped around him and

rang the bell. A clerk opened the door, smiled at me, glanced down, threw a panic fit, and started shouting. All hell broke loose.

Two large guards in uniform hoisted me by the arms and frog-marched me around to the back side of the building, handing me over to another clerk. I explained that I had come for a visa. Instantly all was action. It was the fastest visa I've ever gotten. Within five minutes I was back on the street, my passport stamped and the iron gate clanging shut behind me.

The next day I scanned the papers for news of an incident at the Bulgarian legation, but found not a word. A case of diplomatic immunity, no doubt.

Visas

THE AVERAGE TOURIST may travel to dozens of countries in Europe and North America without ever needing to get a visa. But for travel bums, visas are an essential part of moving about in the Third World.

Before arriving at a country's border post, you must go to one of its consulates in another country and present your passport. Frequently they'll also want two photographs, a form filled out, and some cash. Then you wait a day or so while they decide whether a) you're up to no good, or b) you're that most desirable commodity, a silly tourist with sights to see and money to spread around.

The result is a permit, stamped and signed in your passport, that lets you enter their country. If you do serious traveling, visas can rapidly fill up the blank pages in your book. When that happens you go to a US consulate and ask them to install a foldout of fresh pages, which flaps out of your passport like a Playboy centerfold.

I once talked to a young British girl, riding a motorcycle, who claimed she had trekked much of Africa without visas. Her technique, she said, had been to sit on the ground and cry when she arrived at a border where they refused to let her cross. My experience with border officials made this story sound improbable, but of course I didn't have her big brown eyes.

Discovering Delphi

As an antiquities buff, I felt obliged to do the grand tour of classical sites in Greece. At Daphni, Corinth, Myceanae, Epidaurus, and Sparta, I duly trudged over the ruins, trying to imagine how they might have looked two millenia or more past. Some sense of place came through; but I never came close to the transcendence claimed by Schliemann, who in 1876 rose from his digs and breathlessly reported that he had "gazed upon the face of Agamemnon."

Delphi, however, was different. A few perfect ruins in a little glade, framed by olive trees, with a view down to the sea: it was everything a classical site should be. I even plucked an olive from the sacred grove and ate it. Of course it had not been processed and was intensely bitter—a fitting remonstrance to he who would profane such a magical place.

Hiking Mt. Parnassus

Having enjoyed my fill of the Arcadian countryside in Delphi, it was time to get moving. So far I had been navigating Greece largely by bus, but now I wanted to get back to train travel. Where was the nearest train station? "Bralos, just a little bit over there," said the helpful donkey-driver. Sure enough, my map showed a town named Bralos on a train line. What I failed to take into account was that the map was large-scale; Bralos was 40 kilometers distant, and it lay on the other side of Mt. Parnassus.

Monking Around

Also it really wasn't Bralos. I assumed that the "B" on my map would come out in Greek as the letter beta, also written "B." Actually, some deranged orthographer had decided to start the name of the town with "Mp," written "Μπ." So while I searched for Βραλος, what signs there were along the road pointed only to Μπραλος.

The Longest Night. At four in the afternoon I set out, pack on back, to walk the "little bit" to Bralos. The path led up into the mountains. I trudged onward. The path was full of switchbacks, which I tried to shortcut by climbing directly up the hill. I got lost in the bushes. Night came; unidentified things began to cough and rustle in the dark. Bralos, Mpralos, or whatever, was nowhere to be found.

Midnight found me walking down the center of a silent, locked-up village high in the mountains. An Orthodox priest suddenly emerged from the shadows. He sized me up instantly. Without saying a word (I assume he spoke only Greek), the priest led me to a small shed behind his church and unlocked the door, revealing a metal army cot inside. He left me there with a lighted candle, and I gratefully bedded down.

I got up at dawn and renewed my quest, leaving a ten-drachma note under the candlestick. About ten in the morning I finally descended the last mile to the railway station. Since then I've wondered if the "little bit to Bralos" routine was a common trap, and whether the priest had become accustomed to adding the periodic rescue of travel bums in the middle of the night to his other parochial duties.



Monking Around

After savoring the civilized delights of southern Greece, pigging out on *souvlaki* and *moussaka*, I was anxious to make my way into Europe proper. But first there lay the enticement of a not-to-be-missed detour that I had heard touted by various travel bums going eastward. It was the trek to Mount Athos.

The Holy Mountain. Athos—or Αγιον Ορος, "Holy Mountain"—is one of three fingers of the Khalkidhiki peninsula, which pokes into the Aegean Sea from the northeast corner of Greece. It has been a semi-independent region since 961 AD, when it was established as an Orthodox



The boat out to the Khalkidhiki Peninsula, on which the semi-independent monasteries of Mount Athos were located. 1961.

ΙΕΡΑ ΕΠΙΣΤΑΣΙΑ
 ΑΓΙΟΥ ΟΡΟΥΣ
 ΑΘΩ

ΚΑΡΤΑΙ ΤΗ 24.7 Ιανουαρίου 1961

αριθ. πρωτ. 11

ΔΙΑΜΟΝΗΤΗΡΙΟΝ

Π Ρ Ο Σ
 ΤΑΣ ΕΙΚΟΣΙΝ ΙΕΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΣΕΒΑΣΜΙΑΣ ΜΟΝΑΣ
 ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΟΡΟΥΣ ΑΘΩ

'Ο επίδοτης του παρόντος 'Ιεροκοινοσφραγίστου καί ένυπογράφου ήμών γράμματος κ. George Rutherford Townner
Αμερικανός διωγμένος

συνιστώμενος ήμείν υπό του Υπουργείου Ήξικεραιών
 μέ ληξείν άδείας του τήν 12-2-1961 ν.ήμερομ.
 έρχεται πρός επίσκεψιν των ένταύθα Ιερών Σκηνωμάτων καί των έν
 αύτοίς άξιοθεάτων. Παρακαλείσθε όθεν, όπως παράσχητε αύτφ, πρός τη
 φιλόφρονι ύποφοχί καί πᾶσαν ήμα δυνατήν φιλοξενίαν καί περιπού-
 ησιν πρός έκπλήρωσιν του δι' όν άφίκετο αύτόσε σκοπού.-

'Εφ' ό καί διατελούμεν λίαν φιλαδέλφως έν Χριστφ άδελφοί
 οι 'Επιστάται της 'Ιερᾶς Κοινότητος του 'Αγίου Όρους Α Θ Ω

'Ο Μεγ. Αούρας Πρωτεπιστάτης Πατριάρχης Γενεύης
 " Δοχειακού 'Επιστάτης Πατριάρχης Κωνσταντινουπόλεως
 " Ξενοφώντος " Γενικός Γραμματέας
 " Έσφιγμένου " Γενικός Αρχιμ. Αθών

My permit from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Thessaloniki, Greece, to visit the monastic enclave of Mount Athos.

Monking Around

monastic enclave by St. Athanasius. Its most fascinating rule is the total exclusion of women, children, and female animals (hey, monks can get pretty weird sometimes).

It is said that this rule was broken only once, by Catherine the Great of Russia, who arrived off the coast in a battleship with its cannons lowered and loaded. She was prudently allowed to make a brief excursion ashore. Another anecdote has the local fishermen presenting Saint Athanasius with a large sturgeon. Upon being opened, the fish was discovered to be big with roe, whereupon the saint preserved his chastity by throwing it back in the fishermen's faces.

My Pilgrimage. To go to Athos you needed to get a permit from the Orthodox Patriarchate in Thessaloniki, which in turn required a letter of request from the U.S. Consulate. So I put on my white shirt (carefully preserved for such occasions) and did the paper chase.

Permit in hand, I did the Athos drill. It consisted of a day-long bus ride to Ierrisos, an overnight stay there in a hostel maintained for



A cool dude monk at Panteleimon. Check those shades!



The Day of Judgment, as depicted in the monastery of Xeropotamou. Wow! Better work on your halo...

Travel Bumming: Greece



A passel of monks leave the boat, going back to their monasteries after having sampled the fleshpots of Thessalonicki.

traveling monks, and a ride the next day along the coast in an open boat. One extra feature was a stop in Stagira, the birthplace of Aristotle.

Once deposited on the Athos peninsula (waggling my beard to prove I was not a female animal), I was free to hike from monastery to



The monastery of Panteleimon on the Athos peninsula. After a thousand years of miscellaneous on-and-off construction, many of the Athos monasteries had become huge and labyrinthine. 1961.

Scootering Crete

monastery, usually an easy day's walk. No money was required; the monks took you in as a guest, always starting with a little welcome tray of ouzo, a sweet bun, and coffee you could strip paint with. Then you settled into their ritual.

The Monastic Life. The ritual in each monastery was pretty much the same. It consisted of prayers several times a day, interspersed with simple meals of bread and soup at long tables in the refectory. The monks kept raw red wine in wooden tanks and dispensed it freely with the bread.

One monastery, transplanted from a location beyond the Urals, decided not to adjust to local time; so their day started at 1 am and the sun was well above the horizon in the late afternoon when they shuffled off to bed.

Prayers involved a lot of chanting. Visitors were placed in stalls along the walls of the chapels, each equipped with a little shelf to rest your butt on when you got tired. One venerable abbot, swinging a censer, inspected me very carefully. Then he shook the censer vigorously all around me until I choked on the smoke. Apparently satisfied that I had been duly purified, he moved on.

During my week's stay I visited ten monasteries—Iviron, Stavronikitou, Pantocrator, Bogoroditsa, Vatopediou, Koutloumous, Xeropotamou, Panteleimon, Xenophontos, and Dochiar. Some were derelict and nearly extinct, maintained by only a few aging monks. Others were magnificent.

In the library at Vatopediou, I leafed through a sixth-century hand-colored copy of Ptolemy's *Geography*. The chapel at Xeropotamou was decorated with graphic murals depicting the day of judgment, with Saint Peter leading the righteous into a sort of elevator going up to heaven while his assistants forked sinners into the abyss. All the monasteries were fortified, and many had labyrinthine structures of chapels,



A roadside shrine in Crete. 1981.

dormitories, and outbuildings, added bit by bit over the last thousand years.

A Modern Artifact. Perhaps the most interesting memento on Athos was the (modern) guest book at Xenophontos, filled with memorials inscribed by travel bums like me. I read a series of entries written during 1942-44, each of the form "*Leutnant Schulz und fünf truppen sind im diesen Kloster gekommen,*" etc. Then there was a gap of several months, followed by an entry that went roughly "We're a couple of blokes from the 23rd Australian Brigade. The krauts have bugged off and we're having a smashing time with the monks here..."

Apparently there had been a chronic problem with souvenirs such as icons and old book pages leaking out of the monastic enclave, for when I boarded the outbound boat a couple of Greek soldiers sifted meticulously through every item in my backpack.

Scootering Crete

When crossing between Egypt and Greece it's tempting to stop over in Crete, as I did twice. Opposite the dock in Chania were several shops

Travel Bumming: Greece



A windblown travel bum and his rented wheels in the hills of Crete, June 1981.

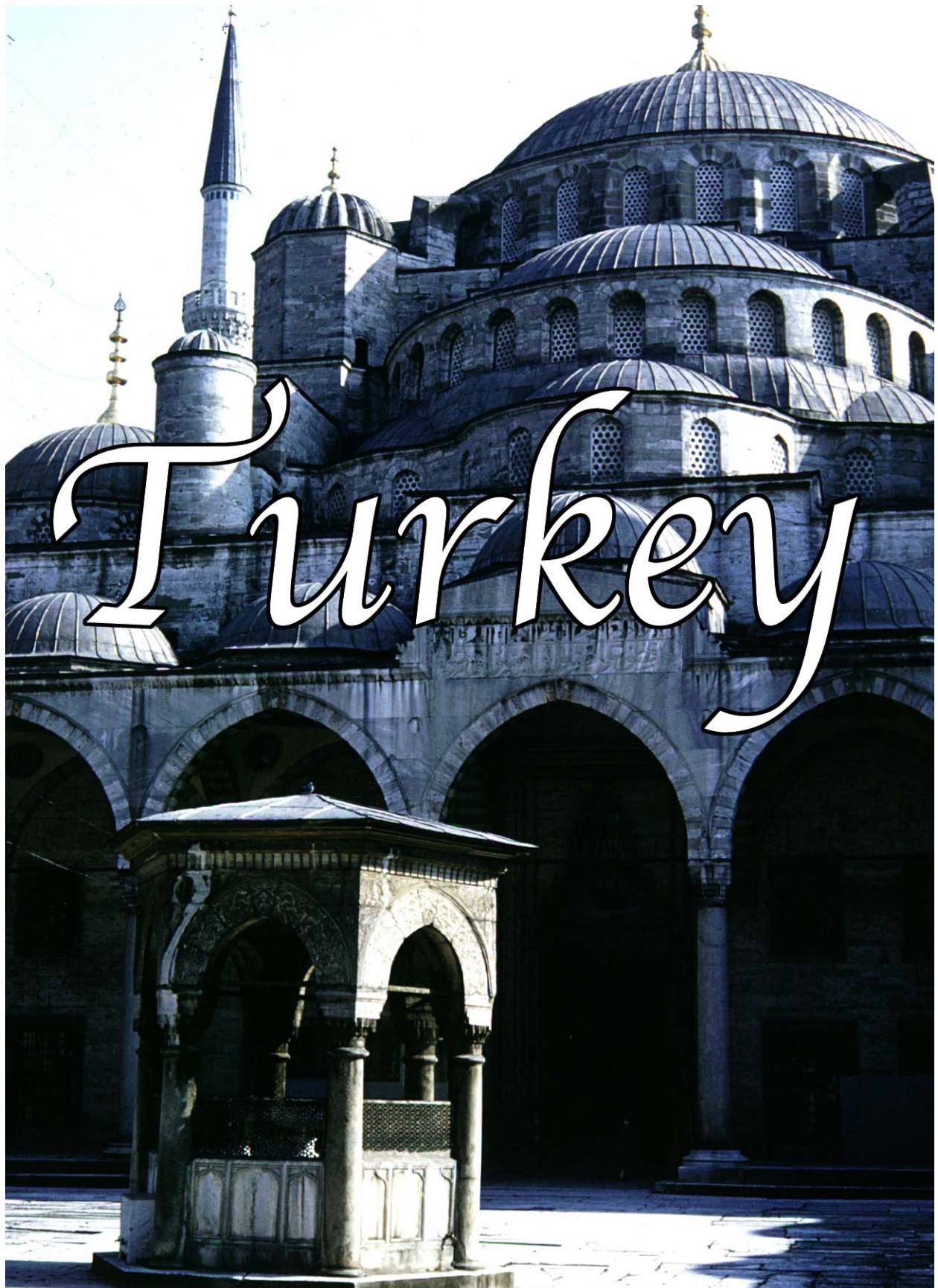
that rented motor scooters. In summer-time, putt-putt was the way to go.

The biggest sight in Crete was the 3,500-year-old palace at Knossos. Dancers and bull-leapers cavorted across the walls in frescoes that looked as if they had been painted yesterday. To get there I scooted through an enchanted valley filled with fruit trees and windmills. It was a bit of magic in the middle of the Mediterranean.

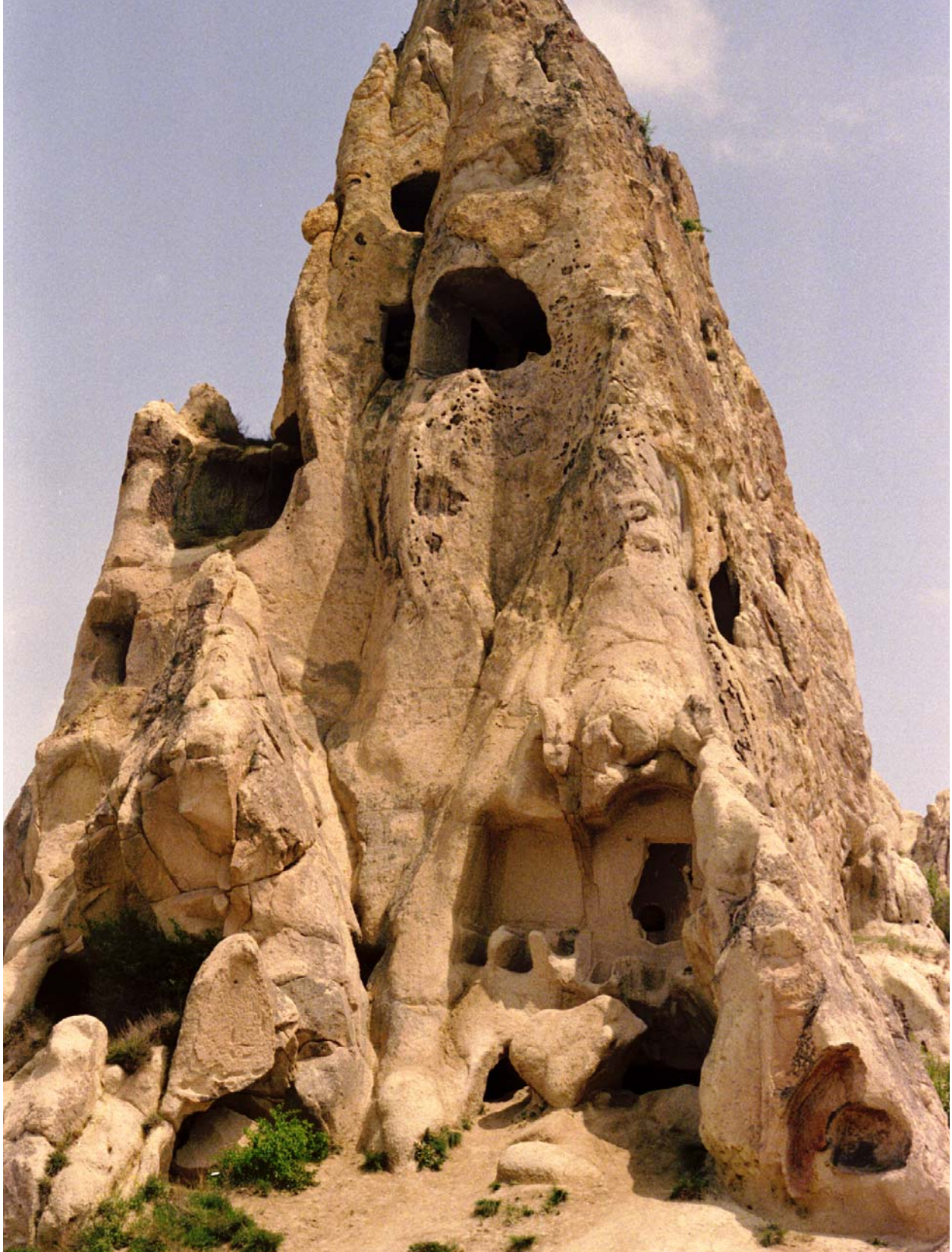
Sic Transit Gloria. Agios Nikolaos, on the eastern end of Crete, is now a big travel deal, with planeloads of British tourists flying in for their fortnight holidays. In the 1960s it was still mainly a fishing village, with some of the best calamari on the planet. I realize that this is a common travel bum's complaint—"Today it's overrun with tourists, but when I went there you had row yourself in by canoe and nobody spoke English," etc. Maybe it's an elitist attitude, but nevertheless the problem rankles.

During the 1960s, the sunny south coast of Crete became a hippie destination. A warren of ancient caves, overlooking the beach at Matala, acquired something like a tribal culture of modern dropouts. It was *Lord of the Flies* for big, hairy kids, with chieftains taking over the best caves. Eventually the Greek Archaeological Service moved in, sent everybody packing, and fenced the area off.

🚲 *The easy way to spring from Greece into the heart of Europe is to take the train to Corfu and hop the overnight ferry to Brindisi, Italy. But in 1961 I was bent on Seeing Everything, so I went northward into Turkey, then through the Balkans to Trieste. It was longer, but the opportunity to see Turkey made it easily worthwhile.*



Travel Bumming: Turkey



A set of cave houses in Göreme, Cappadocia. Weirdly enough, some of these holes-in-the-rock are actually inhabitable. Overleaf: Santa Sofia in Istanbul, formerly a Christian basilica and currently a mosque. 1961.



Our convoy of smuggled Mercedes Benz automobiles pauses briefly on its way up into the Zagros mountains. January, 1968.

FOR TRAVEL BUMS, Turkey was always the great bridge. It's where you made the transition between Europe and Asia, between West and East, between Christianity and Islam. In later years (1992 and 2001) I could afford to rent cars in Turkey, but in the 1960s trains were my magic carpet. I even still have my Student Rail Discount Card from 1967.

If you were going eastward, Istanbul was the jumping-off city, the end of the European rail system and the beginning of transportation across Asia. You took the ferry from Galata on the European side of the Bosphorus to Haydarpasa on the Asian side. The boat tied up at the foot of a broad flight of steps ascending to the massive train station. From the relatively European urbanity of Istanbul you passed directly to the color and clamor of Asia. Porters tried to seize your backpack, hawkers waved their wares in your face, beggars plucked your sleeve. Out of the frenzied depths of the station wafted the unmistakable odors of the East—spices, sweat, perfume and excrement. You climbed resolutely toward your train, knowing that for you the world had suddenly become different.

Call Me Istanbul

Winston Churchill disliked the modern name "Istanbul." Until 1930 the city called itself Constantinople, a nice roly-poly name, and before the fourth century it was known as Byzantium.

Whatever you call it, Istanbul is fascinating. The covered bazaar, though not as exotic as some Arab markets, is far more comprehensive. Within its cavernous corridors you can find just about anything the world has for sale. The church/mosque Hagia Sofia, with its multilayered history, is as interesting a building as you can find. And the waterfront action along the Golden Horn beats anything else in Asia.

The Scene at the Gulhane. Hippies flooded into Istanbul during the late 60s, bumming their way to Kathmandu, and claimed the Gulhane Hotel for their own. Although once a relatively elegant place, the Gulhane had fallen on evil days. But it possessed a large, flat roof, and thereon the enterprising Turkish owner had erected a canvas-and-metal hovel, called simply "The Tent," in which you could crash on a straw

Travel Bumming: Turkey



Turkish boys mob our procession of Mercedes cars as it proceeds through a village in eastern Turkey.

mat for fifty cents a night. Once inside The Tent you didn't even have to buy dope. To get stoned, all you had to do was breathe.

I generally avoided drugs while travel bumming, because you never knew what to expect if you got caught. In some countries it was nothing; in others, a drug rap could ruin your life. One of the stories circulating at the Gulhane was about a couple of American girls in jail somewhere in eastern Turkey. They allegedly asked visitors to smuggle in sleeping pills; when they had accumulated a large enough stockpile, the girls planned to kill themselves.

Turkish Cuisine. Walking near the Blue Mosque one day, a German kid and I passed a restaurant where a dish of tripe was on display in the window. This was not your elegant French *tripes à la mode de Caen*, but the real Turkish stuff, all hairy and gross. It looked like a cow had barfed in the bowl.

We started daring each other to buy some and eat it. I finally took the dare and managed to get half a portion down. After all, it had cost thirty cents and I was hungry.

The German laughed, but I think he envied my fortitude. It was on the playing field of such Yankee stubbornness that the battles of World War II had been won.

Turkey à la Carte

During my first couple of visits to Turkey I hustled my way through, basically in transit between Greece and Iran. But it was obviously a country worth exploring, so in 1992 Dany and I rented a car and spent a week driving around with our French friend Jacqueline. The experience was so rewarding that in 2001 I went back, with some Mensa friends, to drive Turkey for another two weeks.

Cappadocia the Weird. Southeast of Ankara, Dany and I found Göreme, in Cappadocia, a bizarre area of cone-like geological formations filled with troglodytic caves. Some of the caves were still inhabited. You half expected to see the tenants out walking their pet dinosaurs, like the Flintstones.

At Kaymakli there was even an entire city that had been constructed underground, for

Heading For Iran

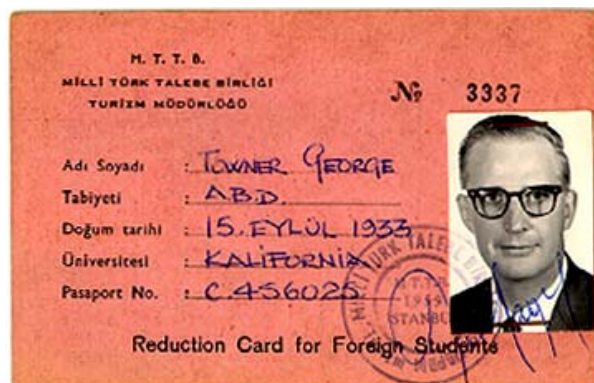
reasons of defense. You entered through a relatively small shaft that branched out into an ant's castle of subterranean rooms and corridors. Climbing up and down and sideways, I soon got lost and had to be shouted back to the entrance. It was said that at one time this three-dimensional metropolis had housed as many as 15,000 mole people.

A Limestone Bathtub. Up there with Göreme on the uniqueness scale was Pamukkale, a natural limestone formation that pours over a cliff in western Turkey. It had been famous since Roman times for its heated springs.

In 1992 Dany and I were able to rent a kind of motel room right on the brim of the Pamukkale cliff, so we could slip out our bedroom door and into a limestone tub of thermal waters. But by 2001 the whole place had been (rightly) placed under environmental protection; the motel was gone and the limestone pools were fenced off.

Heading For Iran

Erzerum, in the eastern mountains of Turkey, was bitterly cold the night of January 23, 1968, as I swung my backpack off the train from Ankara. My pack wasn't heavy because practically every piece of clothing was out of it and on my body,



I rip off the Turkish railways, 1968. Clean-shaven was one the many disguises I adopted as a travel bum.

including two sweaters and four pairs of socks. The midnight scene was straight out of Dostoevsky—icy moonlight revealing a line of horse-drawn sledges in front of the train station. A kid from Chicago and I shared a ride through the snow to a barely heated mud-brick hotel, where we huddled fully clothed in our sleeping bags until morning.

Erzerum was the jumping-off place for travel over the Zagros Mountains to Tabriz, Iran. There were buses that made the trip, but in winter you could easily arrive half-frozen on the other side, or not at all. I asked a truck driver who had just



The limestone ledges and heated pools of Pamukkale at sunset, 1992. These fragile formations are now closed to tourists.

Travel Bumming: Turkey

arrived from Iran, his cab crusted with ice, about the road.

"The f—ing road, she covered with g— d— snow," he started out, merrily. I stopped him.

"Where did you learn to speak English?" I asked. The trucker puffed out his chest. "US Army boys teach me speak f—ing English!"

Traveling with Mr. Big. In 1968, the choice for travel bums like myself was to go over the mountains by smuggled Mercedes-Benz. A bulky German known as "Mr. Big" (we never learned his real name) maintained a parking lot on the outskirts of the city filled with used sedans. These cars had spent a full life as taxicabs in Germany and were now ready for the secondary market in Iran. The profit lay in getting them into Iran without paying duty. Each American citizen could import one car free of duty; so in return for the use of your passport, Mr. Big gave you \$100 and the opportunity to drive in comfort as far as Tehran.

Of course nothing in life is simple, and this deal was no exception. At the border an entire page of your passport was defaced with notices about "your" car, and you couldn't leave Iran until your passport had been restored with a stamp saying that the car had been legally disposed of. But Mr. Big, the very soul of jovial assurance, promised to take care of all that.

Our convoy left at dusk, so we would arrive at the border after midnight, when the bribed customs officers were on duty. Each car had a television set on the front seat and a stack of unidentified cartons on the back seat, for maximum smuggling efficiency.

My Chicago friend elected the \$100 deal; but because his car was missing its TV, I was able to decline the deal and ride in his front seat as a spare driver. My passport stayed unsullied and I enjoyed the fun of driving part of the way.

We crawled up the mountain road in the moonlight, a dozen black sedans skidding over the frozen snow. In the dim customs shed at Makoo we stamped our feet and blew on our hands as the Iranian officer filled out his papers. Apparently he was well paid, for when he came to our car he sternly demanded, "Where is your TV?" He obviously didn't want any irregularities to mar the smuggling operation.

But soon we were out of the customs post and on our way again, sliding down the icy slopes into the dawn and reaching Tabriz before noon. We rolled into warm and sunny Tehran by late afternoon and scattered to various hotels.

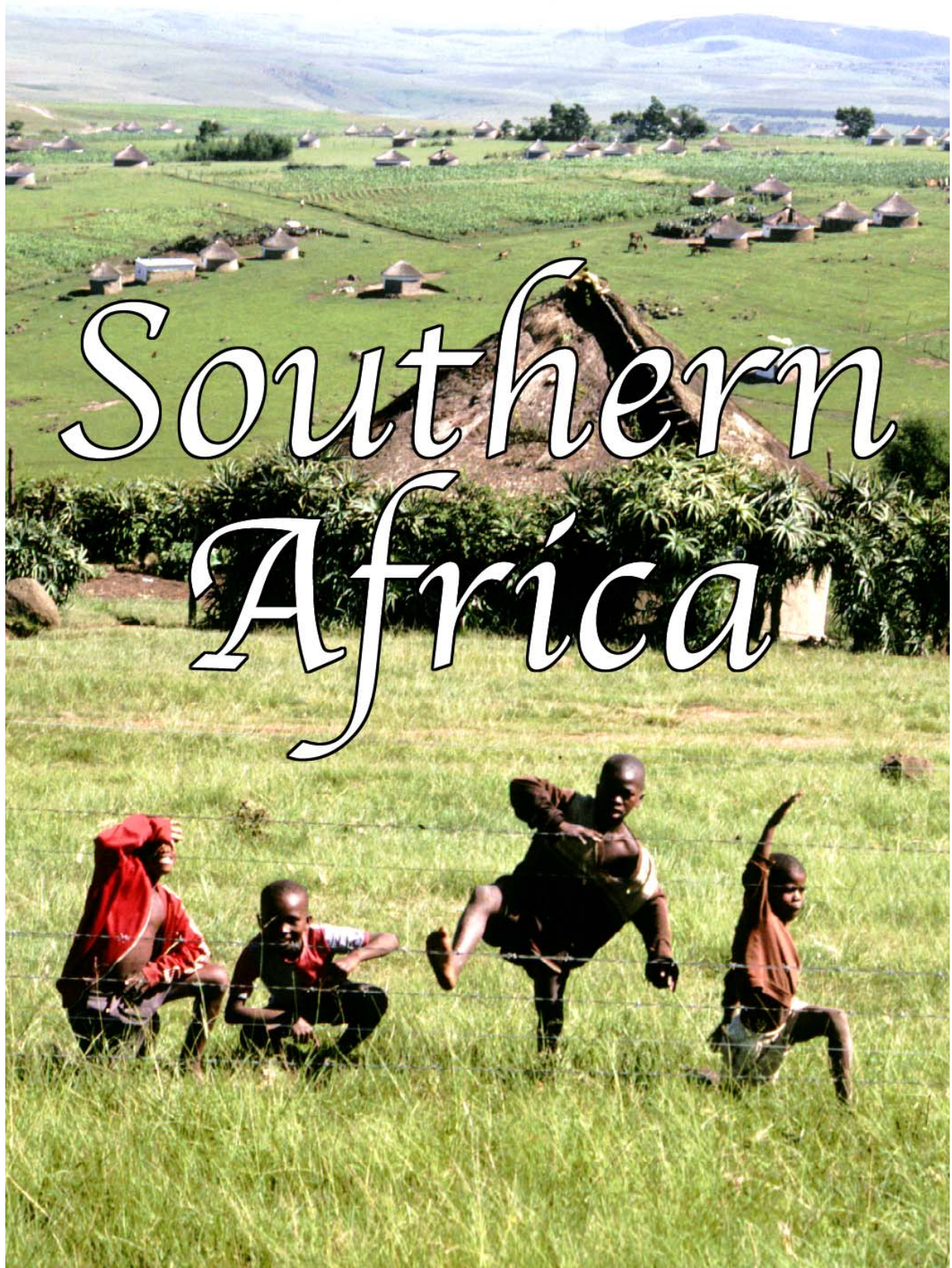
The Poisoned Passport. Later, in Pakistan, I ran across a kid from New York who had driven one of the other cars. He told me that everyone except him had gotten their passports duly signed off the next day. But he had argued about something with Mr. Big, who had told him to go screw himself. What to do? His passport said he couldn't leave Iran without a car that he didn't possess, and Iranian jails had an evil reputation.

He showed me how his Yankee ingenuity had finally solved the problem. He had drawn little pictures all over the passport page that listed the car. When he left Iran on the bus to Afghanistan, he successfully convinced the Iranian exit police that the strange-looking page in his passport was a Japanese visa.

🚲 *The trans-Asia trek, across Turkey and Iran to India, was the primal travel bum experience. Every German kid with \$100 and a yen to do his wanderjahr tried it. Yet what about Africa? The dark continent beckoned enticingly across the Mediterranean, but I had heard that backpacking Central Africa was notoriously tough travel. Westernized countries like Egypt didn't reflect the problems that existed south of the Sahara. So I started with the eastern and southern parts of Africa, where the British had left behind facilities that supported travel bumming.*



This way to the whorehouse! The Romans carved a helpful directional sign into the pavement at Ephesus.



Southern Africa

Travel Bumming: Southern Africa



A lady on the train in Zimbabwe bargains for a souvenir. 1984.

Overleaf: Boys in the Transkei homeland, South Africa, rush to get in on the day's entertainment, a Westerner with a camera. 1984.



Costumed dancers in Zambia put on a show. The performance, complete with howling, was actually fairly spooky. 1965.

AFRICA IS A CONTINENT of distinct regions. North Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, is Arab and Muslim and most of it is very dry. East Africa, from Kenya to Zimbabwe, is filled with farms and savannahs. It's where the great animal herds roam. South Africa has industries and modern cities, and its climate is much like that of California. The central part of Africa, south of the Sahara, is warm, wet, and covered with jungle.

During the nineteenth century, the British and the French divvied up the best parts of Africa. Starting from the coast, the British poured into the temperate south and east. The French sailed across the Mediterranean and grabbed the northern and western interior, although the British managed to hang onto coastal tracts such as Ghana and Nigeria. In this land rush King Leopold wound up with the Congo basin, and the Portuguese and Germans got in their dibs, but it was mostly an Anglo-French show.

A Continent Shortchanged. Whatever their motivations, the colonists found an environment in sub-Saharan Africa quite different from what they had worked with in Asia.

When taking over India and Indochina, they had built upon the existing infrastructure of kingdoms and institutions. In Africa, by contrast, they saw only natural resources, with people useful mainly as cheap labor. Institutions were not needed. Thus when the colonists left, in the twentieth century, Asia remained largely



The face of Kenneth Kaunda smiles benignly from the Zambian currency.



I wonder whether the Disney company knew about this place in Transkei. They didn't really sell antelope sandwiches. 1984.

functional while Africa quickly became a basket case.

For the travel bum, Africa south of the Sahara always offered fewer facilities for moving about and dicier problems of health and safety. It was famously "tough travel." The first couple of times I went there (1965 and 1973), I stuck to the tourist routes. These routes were best developed in Southern and Eastern Africa—areas that had formerly been ruled by the British.

Business in South Africa

My baptism into the African scene took place late in the afternoon of October 28, 1965, as I landed at Johannesburg on a direct flight from London.

At the time I was running Berkeley Instruments Corporation, manufacturing automatic weather stations. I was working 70-hour weeks, meeting a payroll of 50 employees, and hustling sales of our products.

Our agent in South Africa had gotten us a goodly order from the government there and needed me to come down to press the flesh with various officials. In addition, our high-tech design (with my name on the patents) had won a gold medal in a regional product fair, necessitating more ritual.

Learning to Drive Again. The sales agent plucked me out of customs at the Jo'burg airport and proposed that we get together in an hour for drinks at his place on the

other side of town. He tossed me the keys to his car and disappeared.

I hauled my baggage out to the curb and staggered backwards. Ye gods! They drive on the left here! A manic mass of rush-hour traffic was pouring through the airport and into downtown Johannesburg, all going the wrong direction.

"Knowing you are about to die," said Dr Johnson, "concentrates the mind wonderfully." For the next hour I thought of nothing but the mechanics of driving and the street layout of



Girls with color-coordinated buckets pose for the camera in Transkei. 1984.

The Mountains of the Moon



A bus falls off the road in Uganda, 1965. Such occurrences were fairly common, but it seemed that people rarely got hurt.

Johannesburg. Eventually I found our agent's apartment building and gratefully pulled over, grinding his car's wheels into the curb. Well, who'd have thought they'd have put so much of the car on the left side?

An American Drink. I spent a long week in Johannesburg and Pretoria, doing business and meeting people. On Sunday, I got together with a bunch of South African yuppies for a suburban barbecue. It was a warm day—November is early summer in the Southern Hemisphere—so I asked if there was any iced tea. The question evoked gapes of astonishment; nobody had ever heard of such stuff. It was as if I had asked for a bumper of aardvark urine.

The upshot was that I went to the kitchen, boiled and strained loose tea (they didn't even have tea bags) and put the result in the fridge. An hour later my exotic concoction was passed around in tiny glasses. The guinea pigs each took a sip and politely laid their glasses aside. Evidently South Africa was not primed for revolution, tea-wise.

The Mountains of the Moon

During that same business trip in 1965, I took a couple of weeks off to see Victoria Falls and wander about in Kenya and Uganda.

I had always wanted to see the Mountains of the Moon—the Ruwenzori range, a line of snow-capped peaks near the equator that Ptolemy had surmised might be the source of the Nile. From Nairobi I drove to Kampala, Uganda, and put up at the Mungo Park Hotel.

Here, too, they drove on the left side, but by then I was used to it. Well, nearly. While drifting along a quiet country road in Uganda, musing over the landscape, I didn't notice an impatient truck sneaking up behind me. He leaned on the horn, so I obliquely pulled to the right, which of course was into the middle of the road. I was served a rich helping of colloquial Swahili through the car window as he careened past me.

Hutus and Tutsis. From Kampala I took an overnight train to Kasese, at the base of the fabled moon mountains. This normally quiet



The Treetops Hotel in Kenya, 1965. To the left was the waterhole and rooting-ground where animals gathered after dark.

mining town was filling up with refugees from Rwanda, a hotbed of bad feeling between the newly independent Hutus and the newly dispossessed Tutsis.

The two groups were easy to tell apart, as the Hutus were seldom more than four feet tall and the Tutsis seldom less than six. One result was a surreal scene in Kasese's main saloon—one end of the room crawling with little people and the other a forest of supercilious giants.

The mountain peaks I had come to see stayed coyly draped with clouds. But just as I was boarding the train back to Kampala the mists parted a bit and I got a glimpse of snow—the same view, reported by travel bums 2,500 years ago, that had fired up the imaginations of the Greeks.

Treetopping

Nairobi, of course, is the gateway to East African game watching. I have managed to get there three times and I'm ready to go again.

My first time in Nairobi, 1965, I took a quick but fascinating drive through the city game park. My main memory of that visit was watching a pair of lions *in flagrante delicto*.

He was a grizzled old veteran, with a luxurious mane and bare patches on his rump, like a worn carpet. She was young, svelte, and I guess irresistible. She teased him until he finally got to his feet, roaring and grumbling, and industriously humped away. Then he fell back on his side for five minutes, until she teased him into action again. This leonine porno show seemed to have been going on all afternoon; after three or four loops, I got bored and drove away.

The next day I headed out to Treetops, about 50 miles north. This was the famous hotel-in-a-tree overlooking a jungle waterhole. Elizabeth of England had been staying there only 13 years earlier when she was abruptly informed that she had become Queen.

The hike from the trailhead to the hotel was memorable for the circles of massive wooden telephone poles planted every hundred yards or so. If marauding elephants appeared, we were told, we were to run to the nearest circle and slip inside.

An Animal Floorshow. After formal dining up in the tree—crystal, silverware and all—we gathered on the high balcony to watch the evening action at the waterhole below. The rooting ground had been spiked with salt, so

On Safari

this hole was surely rated three stars in the jungle Michelin. As advertised, the animals soon came trooping in to drink, root, and gossip.

They seemed to adhere to a timetable. Antelopes at 7:45, elephants at 8:30, rhinos at 9. This made for a remarkably peaceable kingdom, albeit punctuated by the occasional dust-up.

I watched two rhinos square off and rumble into each other like a pair of switch engines. They collided with a deep thump, sat down on their butts, and then walked away. I thought I heard one of the elephants mumble, “Well, you know, *rhinos*, what can you expect?”



A wary zebra in Kruger Park, South Africa. 1984.

On Safari

My second and third visits to Nairobi, in '81 with Martha Johnson and in '92 with Dany and Jacqueline, were more like travel bumming. We stayed at the delightful and inexpensive Fair-

view Hotel on the outskirts of town, where they played croquet on the lawn and served a proper tea on the terrace at tea-time. Feeling very *pukka sahib*, we went on safari.

Guests in the Wild. When you camp out in one of the African game parks, you are always



Victoria Falls. The Zambezi river, half a mile wide, meets the Great Rift Valley with spectacular consequences. 1965.

Travel Bumming: Southern Africa



Zambian kids are happy to pose (?) for their picture. 1984.

aware that the locale belongs to the animals, not to you. This can show up in little ways. In the Nairobi game park, for example, I watched a French couple stopping in their tiny rental car to watch a big male baboon. The baboon was, if anything, even more interested in them. He hopped up on the hood and studied them intently through the windshield. At the same time, absorbed like a student doodling in class, he absent-mindedly twisted off their car's radio antenna.

The Slow Die Young. In Masai Mara, 1981, I watched from a respectful distance as a hungry cheetah prowled the edges of a herd of zebras. Suddenly there was a rush and a cloud of dust. A teenage zebra, loitering a minute too long by a tempting patch of grass, had been cut out. The chase, back and forth, was short. Pretty soon the cat had Kid Z by the haunches and was sitting down to enjoy his lunch.

We drove as close as the guide dared to go. The zebra was alive but in shock, his eyes already glazing over. The cheetah, his appetite sharpened by a nice run through the grass, started munching on the zebra's tender rear end,

pausing occasionally to look up and drool gobbets of blood. What a way to go! The rest of the zebra herd milled about at a prudent distance and watched in silence. They didn't even try to sing "We Shall Overcome."

Recent research suggests that zebras evolved stripes to make them anonymous. Pack predators often work by picking out one animal from the herd and harrying it to exhaustion. The theory says that stripes are a kind of camouflage that helps individual animals blend into one



A cheetah stops for lunch, with zebra as the main course. 1981.

On Safari

another. But this evolutionary trick would not have rescued the cheetah's lunch that day—Kid Zebra got caught because he didn't mind his mother and wandered away from the herd.

Luxury in the Bush. In '92, fortified by a bit more money than I had been able to assemble on previous trips, Dany, Jacqueline and I went for relative luxury. The Siana Springs camp, located on the eastern boundary of the Masai Mara reserve, offered guest tents with private bathrooms and a dining tent of local repute.

In the event, it was everything one could want. After a busy day of game viewing, you quaffed an expertly-made martini and sat down to a dinner of local venison. An armed ranger then led you along a trail to your tent, which was out a ways, and zipped you in for the night. For after-dinner entertainment, you were treated to an evening of Sounds of the Bush, drifting in through the mosquito netting. In our case the program included the screams of a very upset monkey being assassinated by some sort of cat. You could tell you were in Africa.

We had driven to the camp in a car we rented in Nairobi, so for game viewing we had only to

hire a guard. His function was not to save us from marauding lions but to help us shoot our way out if we stumbled across poachers. He was armed with a .30-caliber carbine.

Our guard was splendidly tricked out in cleanly pressed khakis, so he didn't appreciate it when I got stuck in the mud and he had to help rock the car out. Nor was he delighted when a tire went flat and we had to get a village handyman to patch it.

My policy is to never let a man with a gun get upset at me. An extra *baksheesh* went far to soothe his temperament.

Ants in My Pants. We had brought a box lunch and decided to stop under a shady tree to eat. A pride of lions were taking their midday siesta about fifty yards away, but our guard didn't see them as a problem.

A hillock under the tree looked like it was intended as a natural stool, so I sat down. Big mistake. It was actually an anthill—an anthill full of big, red, aggressive ants—and within seconds they were all over me. While the guard busied himself laughing, I started jigging about and pulling off my clothes.



A hippo pool in the Mara river, 1981. Why does it make me think of the exercise pool at a Weight Watchers health spa?

Travel Bumming: Southern Africa



Lake Nakuru in Kenya. I took this picture in 1965, when the flamingos were abundant. 1992 was another story.

The lions rose from their midday torpor and took notice. Tourists they had seen plenty of, but never one doing the Dance of the Seven Veils. As my white flesh began to appear they realized that they were watching something unique, like a candy bar unwrapping itself.

Eventually I got my pest problem under control and we moved off to a less crowded picnic spot. The lions seemed sorry to see me go. My improvised floor show had obviously been the high point of their day.

Wandering Hippos. The Masai Mara reserve runs along the Mara river before that muddy stream empties into Lake Victoria. It's a prime habitat for hippos, who congregate in shallow pools where the water broadens out. Although torpid during the days, these beasts come lumbering out at night and wander about, like three-ton raccoons. Their bellowing is the lullaby that wafts you off to sleep.

Basically, a hippo goes anywhere it wants. Camping on a bluff overlooking the river, we were told to stay put after dark. It was essential advice. A week earlier a British lady, deciding to take an evening stroll, had been stepped on and badly mangled.

Sic Transit Flamingo. The first time I saw Lake Nakuru, in 1965, it was a glorious stretch of flame-pink water, covered with thousands of flamingos. As you walked down to the shallow

bank, the avian crowd parted in a flurry of white and scarlet, filling the air with color.

Returning to Nakuru, in 1992, was a different experience. By then the town of Nakuru had acquired several factories and a sewage system, all of which emptied into the lake. A handful of birds remained on the water, but they stayed out in the center. A few water buffaloes rooted around the bank, which was now streaked with chemical runoff. Things change.

Disputed Right of Way. Kruger Park, which Christine and I visited in 1984, was noted for its elephant herds. They seemed to be happy to share the park with automobiles, but they also usually won if push came to shove. You didn't want to get into a shoving match with an elephant.

As we entered the park, Christine and I were advised that "elephants have the right of way." So when one suddenly lumbered onto the road ahead of us, we politely stopped. It was a huge bull with long tusks. We thought he was just crossing, but apparently he had other ideas. He turned in the middle of the road, faced us, and started flapping his ears.

I had read somewhere that this was a Bad Sign. Sure enough, the elephant not only flapped his ears but also trumpeted loudly and started rumbling forward. I threw the car into reverse and backed up as he gathered speed. It was a

The Equator

straight bit of road, but still I didn't feel all that comfortable going twenty miles an hour in reverse. Finally Jumbo must have decided that we were chickening out, for he turned and stomped off into the bush, giving us one final trumpet of farewell. Our meeting must have been satisfying to him, and I was pleased as well that I wasn't going to have to explain to the rental company how their car got flattened.

The Equator

Kenya is one of the few places in the world where one can visit the Equator on land. If you trace that sneaky little line eastward, it manages to avoid the Indian subcontinent entirely and crosses only a relatively inaccessible part of Sumatra before disappearing into the Pacific. You can find it in Ecuador, but then it plunges into the Amazonian jungle, swims the Atlantic, and gets lost in the wilds of Gabon before showing up in Kenya again.

I made the pilgrimage to the Equator twice, in 1965 and 1992. Where the two-lane road crossed the line, just south of Thompson's Falls,



The Equator in Kenya, 1965.

a metal sign was posted by the side of the road. The first time, there was nothing else; the second time, a parking area had been carved out and souvenir hawkers had set up their tables.

A Physics Lesson. A native savant in the parking area purported to show, for a small fee, how the Coriolis force interacted with Equatorial geography. His equipment consisted of a brass bowl with a hole in the bottom, a plastic jug of water, and a genial disregard for the practicalities of physics.



Fording a stream in the Masai Mara game preserve. 1981. The trick is to keep moving. If you stop, you're stuck.



This elephant in Kruger Park disputed our plans to drive on his road. We gracefully ceded him the right-of-way. 1984.

We all remember being told, in high-school physics class, that water draining out of a container will tend to swirl counter-clockwise in the Northern Hemisphere and clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere, responding to the underlying rotation of the Earth.

While theoretically present, this Coriolis force is several orders of magnitude smaller than the other forces that affect draining water, and in any event the force becomes zero at the Equator. Nonetheless, the fast-talking Kenyan professor set up his table and bowl north of the Equator sign, swirled water out of it in one direction, then repeated his demonstration south of the sign, noting that the water swirled the other way. How could you argue with such a visible proof? Even in darkest Africa, the mysteries of science may become revealed.

Hanging Out in Hwange

It was January, 1984, and Christine and I had taken our fill of viewing Victoria falls from the southern side, in Zimbabwe. Our visas would give us only one chance to cross the rickety steel

bridge northward over the Zambezi Gorge into Zambia. We had heard good things about the game viewing at Hwange (formerly known as Wankie), 130 miles southeast. So about four in the afternoon we rented a car from the Victoria Falls Hotel and headed off.

At that time the President of Zimbabwe was named Reverend Canaan Banana. We were cautioned to repeat his name several times in private until we could say it with a straight face. It was said that a British tourist had recently been jailed for bursting into laughter when a tour guide mentioned the President's name.

The drive was uneventful. But nobody had told us that a couple of whites driving across Matabeleland after dark was considered insane. Maybe it was so crazy that nobody thought to put a log in the road, stop us, and strip us to the skin. In any event, we pulled into the Hwange lodge compound about nine, just as soldiers were barricading it for the night.

The Dispossessed. We were hailed in the bar by a dozen twenty-something white Zimbabweans. The men were big, strapping farm boys, the

Life in the Big City

women tough as leather. As we drank beer with them and ate a late dinner, we realized that our companions were floaters—a colonial generation looking into a black hole. Their parents continued to hang onto the family farm, hoping something would turn up, but these kids were convinced that the blacks would soon take everything away. For them, the only visible future was drinking beer and hitting the road, enjoying life as long as they could.

They were right. Before these kids turned thirty, the whites ceased to have a say in civil affairs. Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister turned strongman, elbowed the Reverend Banana aside and started confiscating white farms. Soon once-prosperous Zimbabwe became a third-world disaster.

The next day we drove out to the viewing platforms and saw some zebras and antelopes. But in some ways the most interesting wild life I saw in Hwange was those dispossessed farm kids. I often wonder how they turned out.

Life in the Big City

Nairobi in '65 and '81 was a relatively safe and tidy town, but by '92 it had become badly crime-ridden. Reports since then say that it has gone downhill even more. In '92, Dany and Jacqueline and I were walking along Kimathi Street, on our way to the store where I had bought a safari suit eleven years earlier, when a young black kid suddenly snatched Jacqueline's gold necklace. He was off like a shot and we figured the necklace was gone.

But twenty minutes later, in another part of town, a flatbed truck pulled up beside us. In the back were a half-dozen strapping black men and one terrified little kid,



Entrance to the game park at Hwange, 1994.

holding the necklace. They were the local vigilantes.

After handing back Jacqueline's jewelry, they suggested strongly that we'd enjoy watching them beat the tar out of the kid. That appeared to be the main point of the exercise, but it did not strike me as a Good Idea. I found myself defending the brat that I had been cursing ten minutes earlier.

Finally I talked the lynching party down. They gave the kid a few cuffs and sent him



Tourists in the Nairobi game park being inspected by Curious George, a baboon.

Travel Bumming: Southern Africa

packing. With considerable grumbling, the truckload of Kenyan youths went off to find another miscreant and a more sporting victim.

“Doing” Africa

Doing business in Johannesburg in 1965 had given me a glimpse of South Africa without letting me see it as a real travel bum. So in January, 1984, Christine Palmer-Persen and I flew to Capetown and rented a car. We drove for ten days in a great loop around the country and wound up at Jo’burg, where we boarded a train northward to Victoria Falls.

This trip was the start of a serious attempt to “do” all of Africa, from south to north. Time was growing short for such a trip; in fact, within a few years tribal warfare and the spread of AIDS effectively closed the continent down to travel bumming.

Black and White. One objective that seemed important to me at the time was to observe the effects of white domination in South Africa while it was still in place. Apartheid and white rule appeared firmly installed in 1984, but in fact it began to crumble barely six years later. So Christine and I made a point of driving to “native” areas and got visas to visit the major homelands, Lesotho and Transkei.

What I saw was an orderly, prosperous country where most of the people were black. I didn’t see any instances of whites lording it over blacks. The homelands were dotted with farms that seemed to be doing well. People, both black and white, appeared to be occupied primarily in living out their lives.

In retrospect, as I trekked northward and saw the dictatorships of central and western Africa, bent mainly on ripping off their own people, South Africa looked better and better. A truck driver in Zambia had told me that he always breathed easier as he drove into South Africa, because he knew that he was protected by laws. So the question was, Can you eliminate the white government and still have rule by law? Looking at the current state of South Africa, I think the jury is still out on that one.

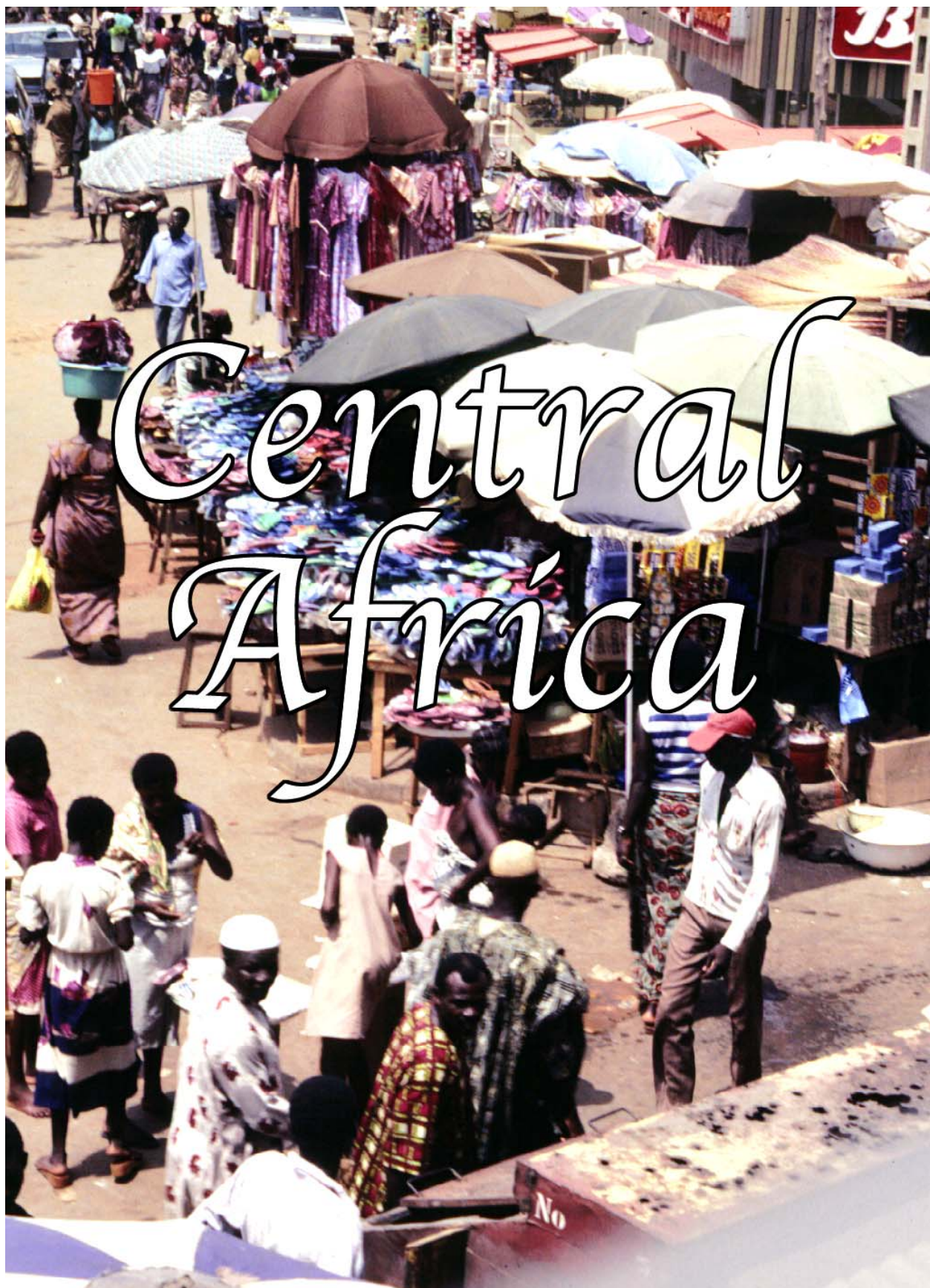
🚲 *In 1984 South Africa was still terra non grata to most other African nations. If there was any evidence in your passport that you’d been there, countries like Zaire wouldn’t let you in. So to combine a visit to South Africa with travel northward, Christine and I had to fiddle our passports.*

We explained the situation to the US State Department and they issued us new passports without cancelling our old ones—in effect, giving us two sets of documents. We used our old passports all through South Africa and its homelands. Then we switched to the new ones on the train to Botswana. We were careful to mail our old passports home at the first opportunity, so they couldn’t be found on us in a search.

Thus we transited into Central Africa and began a long trek northward to the Mediterranean. We had taken a picture of ourselves at Cape Agulhas in South Africa, the southernmost point of the continent; 83 days later we took a similar picture at Cap Blanc in Tunisia, the northernmost point. Between those two photographs lay a lot of “tough travel”—real travel bumming.



A fast food restaurant in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. 1984. Well, they got it almost right.



Travel Bumming: Central Africa



Workers on the railway between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire, in the Congo. I was arrested shortly after taking this picture. 1965.
Overleaf: The marketplace in Lome, Togo. 1984.

The Zambia Cannonball



A village in western Cameroon. 1984. In southern Africa, this style of hut is called a *rondavel*.

CENTRAL AFRICA, running from Senegal in the northwest to Zaire in the south, is lush, wet, and poor; much of it is jungle, and land travel is famously difficult when it is possible at all.

Central Africa was too challenging for a quick, cheap visit, so it wasn't until 1984 that I mustered the resources for a real trip. In January of that year, Christine Palmer-Persen and I set out to travel from the southernmost point of Africa (literally) to the northernmost point. The core of that trip was the central segment, which ran 3,000 miles from Zambia, just north of Botswana, to Niger, on the southern fringe of the Sahara.

The Zambia Cannonball

One thing the British were good at was railways. Although the fabled "Cape-to-Cairo" service never materialized, the British built a lot of pretty-good rail systems in southern Africa. After they left, however, problems arose. Here are my notes on the train ride that Christine and I took on the first day of February, 1984:

6:00 am. The travel alarm goes off. We have been sleeping in a *rondavel*, an African-style round hut with thatched roof, on the north bank of the Zambezi near Victoria Falls. Although one of the mosquito nets was full of holes, it has

been a peaceful night. Now we wash quickly, jug-and-basin style, and do up our backpacks. We don't want to miss the train to Lusaka, which leaves Livingstone at 8:00 am.

6:45 am. We hike down the road to the government-owned Rainbow Hotel, where the kitchen is just coming awake. They serve us toast, tea, and fresh pineapple juice.

7:30 am. We had made arrangements with a taxi driver the night before to take us 5 km to the Livingstone station. He picks us up by the side of the road. An unexplained additional passenger sits quietly with us during the trip.

7:45 am. Two "standard class" tickets to Lusaka cost 14 *kwachas* (about \$8) each. We buy them and hurry to the train.

8:00 am. There is a train standing at the platform but we are told to wait. Porters are throwing chairs and bags of food out the windows of the dining car. Soon the train backs out of the station, going away from Lusaka. People are beginning to gather in the station.

8:30 am. More people are arriving, evidently old hands who know about 8 o'clock departure times. Much shunting of cars from track to track. A porter arrives with a hand truck full of Coke and Fanta bottles.

9:00 am. At last a train chugs in and everybody gets aboard. The chairs that were thrown

Travel Bumming: Central Africa

off earlier are handed in the windows of the new dining car, along with the Coke and Fanta. Apparently Zambia Railways owns but one set of dining car chairs.

9:15 am. We leave, amid much whistle blowing and flag waving. We chug through the lush landscape past villages of thatched huts, each with its patch of corn and vegetables.

11:00 am. The train has been bouncing violently on the track, so that we are nearly thrown from our seats. We stop at a place called Kabuyu. Cows graze along the track. Little boys come and stare at us. We are the only whites on the train. We smile and wave.

Noon. Still at Kabuyu. We take some pictures of the boys, the cows and the village.

1:00 pm. Still at Kabuyu. Local opinions differ. Some say the engine has broken down; others blame the brakes. We go to the dining car and have two lunches of beef-rice and tea with milk—total 7 *kwachas*. The beef is like leather. They must prepare it from cows that were hit by the train. But the rice is tasty.

3:00 pm. Still at Kabuyu. A Land Rover arrives, filled with railway officials. They climb into the engine. We hear the hissing sound of the

brakes being clamped and released several times.

3:15 pm. The officials leave and the train starts up again, still bouncing violently. We are now more than five hours behind schedule. We hurtle past more cows, boys, and villages.

5:30 pm. Choma, our first big stop. We are besieged by food sellers carrying baskets of corn-on-the-cob on their heads. The corn is delicious, and a bargain at 40 *ngwee*. Three young ladies, dolled up to the point of questionable virtue, plop themselves into the seats opposite us. One of them goes down to the dining car and brings back bottles of Fanta. Another calmly uncaps them with her teeth. Watch out for that one. According to the schedule, we should have arrived in Lusaka by now; instead, we are not yet halfway there.

8:00 pm. The sun has set and the train has filled to overflowing. The extra people help keep it on the track, but occasionally everyone is thrown into a heap nevertheless. We are still the only whites aboard. We have been warned not to walk about Lusaka after dark, and wonder what we'll do when we arrive. The lady with the bottle-opener teeth offers to escort us to a taxi.



A marketplace in Cotonou, Benin. 1984. Cotonou was a dilapidated port city, but upcountry Benin was fascinating.

Stuck in Lubumbashi



A procession in Abomey, upcountry Benin. The gentleman hidden under the umbrella is revealed in the photo on page 155. 1984

11:30 pm. Lusaka station. An incredible scene of shoving, shouting, African humanity. We feel like two plump chickens in a building full of foxes. We grab our packs and run for the taxis.

1:30 am. It turns out that there is an international conference in town. All the regular hotels are either full or have locked their doors for the night. After much searching, we finally secure a room in a bordello on the outskirts of town. I try to stamp on a cockroach, slip on the carpet, and twist my foot. The next morning my ankle hurts a lot, but after a few days of ice and Ace band-aids it feels OK.

Postscript: Eight years later, when my foot was X-rayed for another reason, the film showed that the bone had fractured and knitted. Fortunately no medical advice was handy at the time, or I might have finished my African trek in a leg cast.

Stuck in Lubumbashi

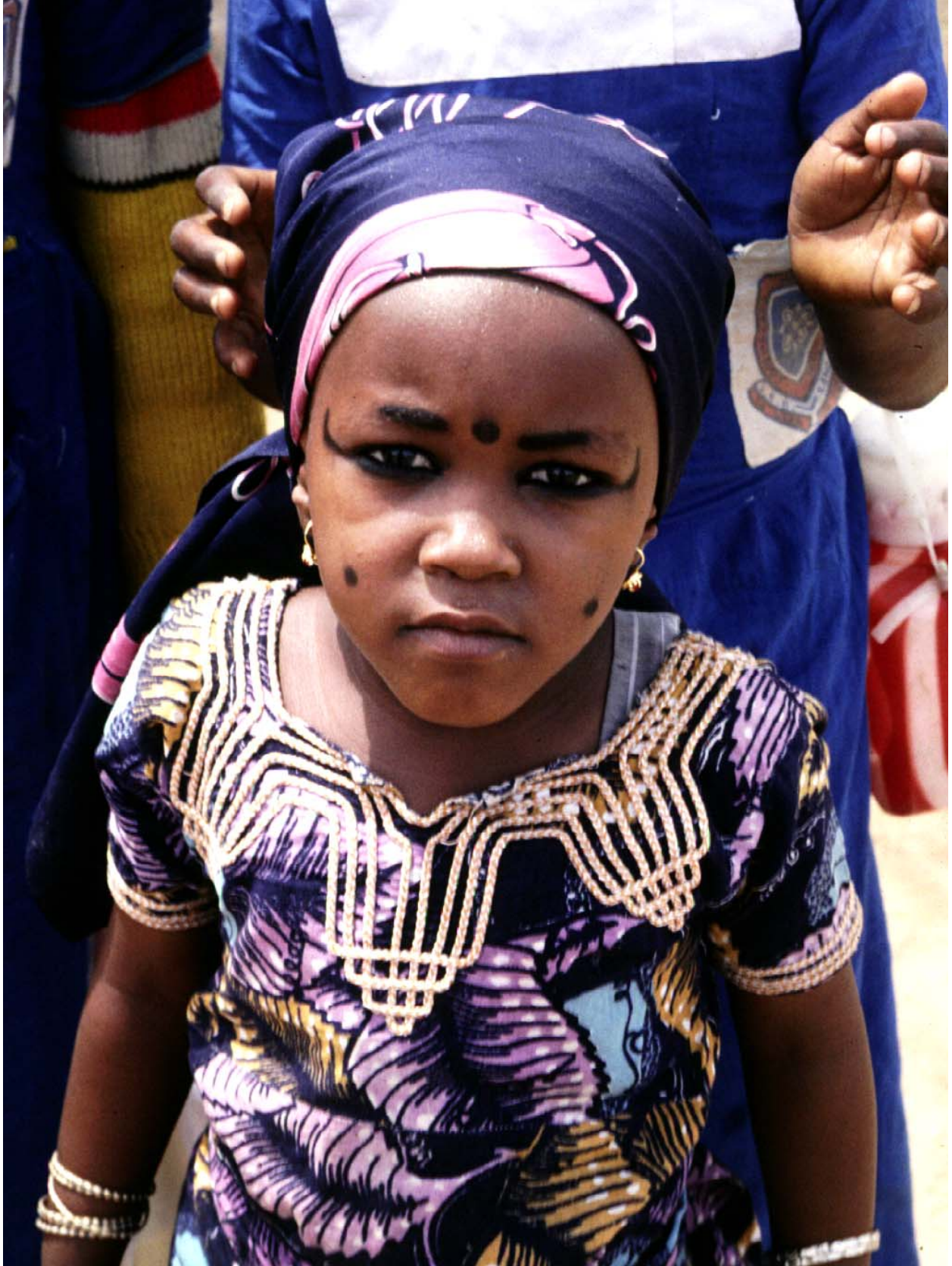
During February, 1984, Christine and I spent more than a week in Lubumbashi, formerly called Elizabethville. It was the southern entry

point for the old Belgian Congo, at that time named Zaire. Since then the country has renamed itself the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but I'll skip the terminological niceties and call it Zaire.

Tutoying My Woman. This was the point at which Christine and I entered French-speaking Africa, a huge area that extends to Algeria in the north and Senegal in the west. We limbered up our shaky French.

As we registered at a hotel the first evening, I noticed that the clerk addressed Christine with the familiar pronoun *tu*, not the formal *vous*. In school I had been taught that using this form of address on first meeting an adult woman meant that he thought she was no better than she ought to be. There was even a French verb for it: to *tutoyer*. He had doubtless noticed that the names on our passports were unrelated.

This apparent impropriety launched me into a longwinded and probably ludicrous attempt to explain our relationship. Then I noticed that the desk clerk was addressing *me* with the familiar *tu* as well. Now thoroughly confused, I shut up.



All dressed up in Kano, Nigeria. 1984.

Later that evening, a local shopkeeper explained the situation. When the French colonists arrived, a century before, they had treated the Africans as servants and spoken to them in the familiar voice. This was the only French the Africans heard, and thus it was the way they learned to speak the language.

So during the rest of our travel in Central Africa we *tutored* exclusively and found it a great linguistic convenience.

A Chancy Train. Lubumbashi was the northern terminus of the regular bus and rail routes that we had followed from South Africa. The next stage involved traveling 950 miles northwest to Kinshasa, near the Atlantic coast, but transport over those miles was difficult at best. Christine and I stopped to take stock.

The normal choice would have been the weekly train. It was supposed to spend three days getting to Ilebo, on the Congo river, where there was supposed to be a steamer that was supposed to spend a week chugging downriver to Kinshasa. We talked to some Peace Corps volunteers; one of their number had left by that route a few months earlier and had not been heard from since. Not a good sign.

Nevertheless we inspected the train as it was getting ready to depart, prepared to make a snap decision. The alleged first class carriage was a beat-up third class carriage that had been promoted by the simple expedient of painting over the Roman numeral "III" with a "I"; not a good sign. There appeared to be no food service whatsoever. The clincher was that the train was filled with big, black soldiers, who were already getting drunk. Definitely a bad sign for a peace-loving white man and "his woman."

So we decided to make a virtue of necessity. We spent a week in Lubumbashi, both getting to know the Zaireans and figuring out how to make our way out of their country.

A Bit of Dash

Our getting stuck in Lubumbashi led to a complication. Our tourist visas for Zaire were good for ten days, but it was inevitable that we were going to overstay that brief time. While we were still in a major city we had to get our visas

The Peace Corps

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS may hold a range of jobs, from teaching computer science to helping dig irrigation ditches. The ones I met in Asia and Africa tended to occupy a middle strata, not urban professionals but not village grubbies either. Their scrubbed American faces showed up in local markets and bus stations and they always seemed ready to talk to a countryman.

An opinion I often heard was that a big part of the value of the Peace Corps was its effect on the volunteers. Some admitted they weren't doing much for their host countries, but felt that the changes in their own lives had been profound. Several went on at length about their coping strategies—buying shampoo, getting the toilet repaired, finding peanut butter, etc. Others were busily planning extensive Third-World trips at the end of their two-year tours. They were helping others primarily by helping themselves.

The old-timers sometimes complained about volunteers starting out with an excess of romantic illusions. They were going to save lives, forestall natural disasters, reign as white queens in the jungle. Occasionally these fantasies were followed by despair, as the dead weight of local poverty and conservatism sank in. A few volunteers were sent home ("deselected" was the term), but mostly they settled down, feathered their nests, and managed to do some good. A few even made a difference.

extended. This required a letter from the U.S. Consulate to the Zairean Regional Administrator and half a day of pushing our case in his office.

So Christine and I went to yet another crumbling government building and handed in our papers. They came back with mysterious protestations of "irregularities." We tried again. Same result. This time an African businessman, who was waiting like us, took us aside and reminded us that we had neglected to contribute a bit of



A local artist in Abomey, Benin, poses with one of his works.

dash, the ubiquitous bribery that keeps African commerce going. Of course! We put a \$10 bill in each passport and they came back like magic, stamped with three-month extensions.

An American Dinner

Dropping by the U.S. Consulate in Lubumbashi (to get a letter to to the Zairean Regional Administrator) yielded a side benefit. They don't see that many Americans wandering through, so the office secretary—who was from California and a bit homesick—invited us to her place for a good ol' American meal.

It was a "compound house," protected by a high wall and well staffed with Zairean servants. We passed a very civilized evening, particularly notable because it had been some time since we'd tasted roast beef and potatoes. After our hostess had plied us for seconds until we could eat no more, she said "Good, the servants will get the rest."

Servants subsisting on leftovers was quite usual in both African and expatriate American households, but it gave me a twist to think that

every second helping I had wolfed down had been subtracted from somebody else's dinner.

Beware of the Dog

At the hotel in Lubumbashi, Christine and I met a young British man who traveled for a pharmaceutical company. Coming in late one night, he was bitten a good one on the leg by the hotel's guard dog. He was remarkably accepting ("Dog only doing his job, you know") but it left him in a quandary about rabies treatment.

Of course the hotel assured him that the dog had been vaccinated, but in Zaire what was that assurance worth? A certificate could have been forged or the dog could have been injected with water. He finally decided to wing it. I looked him up in London a few months later and was relieved to hear that he had come out OK.

The Airline Game

After considering the alternatives, Christine and I decided to pungle up some of our precious American dollars for the daily flight from

The Airline Game

Lubumbashi to Kinshasa on Air Zaire. Their office accepted our dollar traveler's checks and handed us tickets for the next morning, with window seats assigned.

We went out to the airport in plenty of time. The building was locked and on the door was a blackboard on which was scrawled *Pas de Vol Aujourd'hui*—no flights today.

We went back to consult the Peace Corps. "Oh, they haven't flown in the past six weeks, and nobody expects them to fly anytime soon." Down to the Air Zaire office. "A refund? It is very irregular. You must apply to the Minister of Aviation."

Thus we spent the better part of a day being shuffled from sweaty office to sweaty office in a crumbling building on the outskirts of Lubumbashi. Official after official examined our papers with only the dimmest expressions of comprehension and sent us off to yet another office. But my vocalizing must have disturbed their torpor, for by mid-afternoon they gave up and handed me a bank draft. It was for many thousands of *zaïres*.

Banking in Zaire. A note about Zairean money. One *zaïre* used to be worth about a dollar; but with the administration of Mobutu Sese Soko (one of whose official titles was "the rooster who never lets the hens alone"), a dollar came to buy several hundred *zaïres*, the number depending on who you dealt with. The government had been dilatory about printing notes larger than one *zaïre*, so the common unit of currency became the "brick," typically a hundred one-*zaïre* notes tied up with string. A loaf of bread cost one brick, a beer four bricks, and so on. So we took the Aviation Minister's draft down to the bank to turn it into bricks.

Mr. Moneybags. It was not until the bank clerk started piling the money on the counter that it dawned on me that I was being given something like a bushel of cash. I hastily fashioned a sack out of my jacket and stuffed several thousand bills into my shirt, but the overflow sticking out of my pockets still made me look like a cartoon millionaire. Strolling the African streets while shedding currency with every step did not seem like a cool idea.



The guy with all the wives, shown on page 151, is carried about in a sedan chair. Is that a self-satisfied smirk on his face?

Travel Bumming: Central Africa



A fisherman throws his net in Cotonou, Benin. 1984.

On the Road Again

Fortunately, our contacts in the Peace Corps had given Christine and me the name of a Belgian who ran an air freight service between Lubumbashi and Kinshasa. His plane really flew, and his office was only a few doors from the bank. Clutching my jacket stuffed with thousands of banknotes, we scampered down the street like a couple of rabbits dodging bullets.

No problem, said the Belgian. If we didn't mind sitting on crates we could leave the next day. And the half-cord of *zaïres* bundled up in my jacket just happened to cover two tourist-class fares.

Thus two hours in an air freighter's cargo hold—strapped down like a couple of FedEx

packages—brought us to Kinshasa, the capital of Zaïre, on the south shore of the Stanley pool.

Jungle Cuisine. We arrived in Kishasa just at the beginning of termite season, a long-awaited yearly event for Zairean gourmets. Everywhere in the marketplace were baskets of fat white grubs. Do you remember sitting bored in third grade, chewing on your pencil? Combine that taste with the texture of shrimp and you have the savor of fresh Congolese termites, lightly sautéed.

Busted in Brazzaville

In its final 200 miles, between the Stanley pool and the Atlantic, the Congo river is blocked by Livingstone Falls. Thus Kinshasa and its twin city across the pool, Brazzaville, represent the end-point for Congo river traffic out of Central Africa. Both cities have railways that connect them to ocean ports: Kinshasa to Matadi and Brazzaville to Pointe Noire.

Eleven years earlier (April, 1973), I had spent two days in Brazzaville. Because South Africa was blacklisted by its African neighbors, getting to Johannesburg from Algiers had involved flying to Brazza and then waiting two days to sneak onto a flight from Brussels that stopped in the middle of the night to refuel.

Finding myself thus at loose ends for a day in Brazzaville, I had bought a ticket on the train to Pointe Noire and took it as far as the village of Baratier, up in the Crystal Mountains.

Honky in the Congo. It was a poor choice. Baratier had recently been the focus of a guerrilla dustup, and the town was full of soldiers. My winsome white face made me immediately suspect, so they grabbed me and started taking my shoes apart, looking for hidden radios. Any one as out of place as I was just had to be a spy.

Finally deciding that my wanderings were harmless (albeit incomprehensible), the soldiers had escorted me by Jeep back to Brazza, where the hotel manager, with many apologies, had locked me in my room.

So in 1984 it was with a bit of trepidation that Christine and I decided to take the ferry across the Stanley pool from Kinshasa to Brazza and fly from there to Cameroon. The question was

An International Incident

whether the People's Republic of the Congo would remember me, and if so whether they would refuse to let me in. Or worse, refuse to let me out. The way to find out was for me to apply for a visa.

An International Incident

The morning after our arrival in Kinshasa, Christine and I started out bright and early to perform the visa drill at the Congolese embassy. We were taken up by a pleasant and efficient consular officer, who looked at our plane tickets for the next morning and assured us that a visa could be issued that day. Letters from the American consulate, check. Three photographs, check. Vaccination certificates, check. Three forms filled out, check. Six bricks of *zaïres*, check. The officer assembled everything into a bundle, with our passports and plane tickets, and told us to come back at noon.

We returned to the Congolese embassy at 11:30 and sat in their waiting room. The consul—not the person we had met earlier but a tall, severe-looking man named Okembi—reigned in

his office. Our papers were carried in and out of his presence several times. He had a few visitors, mainly young ladies. We waited. Chickens scratched around the front door. His secretary entered his office once without knocking and was made to back out and do it again properly. We waited some more. One o'clock. One-thirty.

Locked Out. At two o'clock Okembi suddenly burst out of his office, shouting and waving his hands in the air. "No, more today," he declared, "I'm going home." He locked his office and headed out the door.

We were horrified. In Zaire, your papers are everything. Without passports we couldn't change money or check back into our hotel. If the police stopped us, our paperless state might land us in jail. Without our plane tickets we couldn't change flights. We followed Okembi to his car, pleading with him to at least give us back our stuff. He shouted in incomprehensible French and waved his arms some more. He climbed into his car, accompanied by a couple of his ladies. As I pleaded with him through the window, the car started to roll.



A village market in central Cameroon.



Smuggled goods on display in a market on the border between Cameroon and Nigeria.

Us Versus Them. At this point the International Incident took place. Christine planted herself in front of the consular car, hoping to give me a little more time to assemble the French irregular verbs I was hurling through the window. Okembi choked with rage. He ordered the chauffeur to run over Christine. The chauffeur tried to hide under the dashboard. In desperation, I launched into pluperfect subjunctives. The ladies in the back seat gaggled with alarm.

Soon it became clear that Christine was no match for a ton of motorized steel. She stepped aside, the car roared away, and we were unceremoniously ejected from the Congolese Embassy.

The next 24 hours were a nightmare of picking up pieces and cajoling various suspicious Africans into accepting our *bona fides*. The American consulate was sympathetic and offered to help get our passports back. By the next afternoon we felt confident enough of the future to treat ourselves to a swim in the pool at the Intercontinental Hotel.

Your Country Needs You. Christine was on her 85th lap and I had just finished a beer when an American Embassy chauffeur appeared at

poolside. Begging our pardon, but the American consul would be most appreciative if we could have a chat downtown. No hurry—any time in the next 10 minutes would do.

The American consul received us in her office. A bit of a problem had developed at the governmental level. As a matter of fact, Okembi was refusing to issue any more visas to Americans. Although consuls don't usually have that authority, he was a nephew of the President of the Congo and pretty much did as he liked. Several aid programs had been suddenly disrupted because Americans were unable to cross the Stanley Pool. The Consul was not officially making demands, but she just wondered if we had considered going back to the Congolese Embassy and apologizing...

Giving In. We mulled over this suggestion. I still had some French past participles that I hadn't tried on Okembi. And we still had to get our stuff back. So the next morning we trudged out to the Congolese Embassy, like good little citizens. After a half hour in the old familiar waiting room, we were led into the presence.

Exiting Zaire

Okembi sat in stony silence as I parsed my *regrettes*.

Then he launched into a twenty-minute tirade. His honor had been abridged. His progress home had been impeded. His lunch had been delayed. He was a man of dignity, a man of the world. Why, he had even been to Paris! Who did we think we were, etc. It was a nostalgic moment for me; I had not been talked to that way since getting out of the Army.

War Averted. Finally Mr Okembi waxed magnanimous. Recognizing our frailties, our insignificance, he had decided to open the border once more to Americans. Peace was declared. His clerk handed back our papers and ushered us out.

Later, at the hotel, we ran into a very worried American professor. His project to rescue the pigmy chimpanzee from extinction had been stymied by the visa ban. We were able to assure him that all was now well. War between the United States of America and the People's Republic of the Congo had been averted, and the honor of Mr Okembi had been restored, at least in Mr Okembi's eyes.

Exiting Zaire

With the Brazzaville route definitely shut down for us, Christine and I faced the same sort of problem we had encountered in Lubumbashi: how to move forward. Our next major stop was Douala, Cameroon, but to get there by land we would have had to cross Gabon. The common opinion was that bussing Gabon was dicey under the best conditions, and at that time of year, with the rainy season in full swing, it was impossible.

So we opted to fly to Douala. This time, however, we made sure ahead of time that the tickets we were buying got us onto a plane that was actually expected to leave the ground.

An African Shakedown. At the Kinshasa airport, waiting for our

night flight, Christine and I caught one last example of why Zaire is sometimes called "the wild west of Africa." I was suddenly plucked out of the boarding line and hustled into a dark, concrete room, where a large man behind a desk was flanked by equally large men guarding the door. It flitted through my mind that I had somehow wandered into Gorilla Island at the zoo. "Empty your pockets," said the man behind the desk. "Now how much of this are you going to give me?"

It's a pleasure doing business with a man who comes right to the point. I began to explain how poor I was, a bum really, quite insignificant, not your average tourist, etc. Then the door opened and an assistant poked his head in, saying something in Lingala. Mr Gorilla curtly motioned me to scoop up my stuff and beat it, which I did in less than 1.5 seconds.

Later, on the plane, an American businessman in a suit complained loudly that he had been relieved of \$300 by a huge man sitting in a little concrete room. I recalled that he had been standing next after me in the boarding line. I thanked him for recounting his story, but I didn't tell him why.



Sign pointing to a restaurant at the train station in Maiduguri, Nigeria. 1984.

Upcountry Cameroon

In the seaport of Douala we stayed at the *Procure de Missions*, a French base for Christian activities throughout Cameroon. Although nominally Catholic, it supported a variety of Protestant sects as well. The accommodations (mainly for visiting missionaries) were spartan, but there was a small swimming pool. Unfortunately the pool water was not filtered, and Christine later suffered significant problems from a parasite that set up housekeeping in her left ear.

Driving to Kumbo. At the *Procure* we met a young missionary couple from Canada who had been seconded to the Baptist hospital at Kumbo, about 150 miles upcountry. She was a doctor and he provided sort of all-around support. Whenever they needed to make a decision they dropped to their knees and prayed on it.

The hospital they were assigned to, although remote, was highly respected in West Africa. Two years later it took the brunt of the cases

when nearby Lake Nios burped a cloud of carbon dioxide that smothered 2,000 people.

The doctor and her hubby were not looking forward to a trip into the interior on public transport, so we cut a deal with the *Procure*: I rented a car to drive them there and the *Procure* agreed to cover half the cost. We even agreed on a budget for *dash* payments. This was particularly necessary if you were to drive outside Douala; it was customary, when army funding was low, to give each soldier a couple of bullets for his rifle and tell him to collect his pay from the traffic out on the highway.

A Happy Escape. We were stopped on the way to Kumbo only once, by a teenage soldier who was trying to look officious by waving a gun in the middle of the road. Just as we were getting down to serious negotiations for our ransom, an older lieutenant stepped out of a nearby hut and started shouting at him. The kid immediately backed off, which we took as a signal to cut and run.



Royal ministers reporting to the Fom of Fouban. They had their rifles out to blow away a sickness in one of his wives. 1984.

The Road To Nigeria

At the hospital in Kumbo, old hands at this sort of thing theorized that the soldier had not previously agreed to give the lieutenant his cut. In the Cameroonian army, extortion may not be a crime but failure to share the proceeds is.

Visiting the Fom. From Kumbo we made a day trip to Foumban, one of the many little kingdoms that still exist in West Africa. We met the *Fom* of Foumban, a severe-looking gentleman decked out with steel-rimmed eyeglasses. One of his wives was sick, and the Royal Ministers had been ordered to shoot their muzzle-loading blunderbusses into the air. The therapeutic value of explosions in driving away disease is well understood in Central Africa, and soon the air was blue with sulfur smoke.

Near the palace was a signboard memorializing the rulers of the Bamoun people back to the fourteenth century. One turbulent reign lasted all of thirty minutes. Political life was rugged in those days. Come to think of it, African politics is still fairly rugged today.

The Road To Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, home to Hausas, Ibos, and Yorubas, as different from one another as Germans from Frenchmen. The landscape they live in ranges from steamy jungle in the south to parched desert in the north.

When Christine and I went there in March, 1984, Nigeria was blessed with oil but was inexorably sinking in debt. A revolution in January had given Nigerians new hopes. The soldiers who took over were on their best behavior, and everybody was trying to prove that the country is not just another banana dictatorship. Honey-moon periods like that are the best possible times for travel bumming.

Long Live the Bush Taxis. We entered Nigeria in the north, crossing out of the Cameroon highlands just south of Lake Chad. Although smuggling had been officially abolished, there was an enormous market just inside the border, filled with Cameroonian goods.

The prevailing medium-class transport in that part of Africa consisted of six-passenger Peugeot station wagons. Elsewhere, African taxi

parks were usually scenes of chaos, as each driver tried to drag you into his vehicle. Here, all was orderly. On top of one car was a wooden box, with the destination and price painted on it. When that car was filled, it peeled out and the box was placed on top of another car. Within five minutes we found ourselves stuffed into a taxi and bouncing over the potholes to Maiduguri.

The Black Market. Nigerian money came in *nairas*, each containing 100 *kobos*. At the bank a *naira* cost \$1.33. But in the marketplace, \$100 cash bought from 200 to 250 *nairas*, depending on how hard you bargained. This useful situation was partly a consequence of the revolution. Every day the papers were full of stories about how officials of the former government have been caught trying to convert their ill-gotten *nairas* into foreign bank balances. However, it also meant that imported goodies, which had to



DYNASTIE BAMOUN		
1~	NCHARE YEN	1594-1418 5-JW-57B-535T
2~	NGOUOPOU	1418-1461 3-2P-535T-535P
3~	MONJOU	1461-1498 2-J5Z-535P-51T
4~	MENGAP	1498-1519 5-53Z-535T-51T
5~	NGOUH I	1519-1544 3-J8T-535T-51T
6~	FIFEN	1544-1568 2-J11-535T-51T
7~	NGOUH II	1568-1590 1-88T-535T-53P
8~	NGAPNA	1590-1629 1-88T-535T-53P
9~	NGOULOURE	1629-1672 1-188T-535T-53P
10~	KOUOTOU	1672-1757 52-188T-535T-53P
11~	MBOUOMBOU	1757-1814 55-188T-535T-53P
12~	GBETNKOM	1814-1817 53-188T-535T-53P
13~	MBIEKOUO	1817-1818 57-188T-535T-53P
14~	NGOUHOUD	1818-1865 55-188T-535T-53P
15~	NGOUNGORE	50 MINUTES 55-188T-535T-53P
16~	NSANGOU	1865-1889 57-188T-535T-53P
17~	NJOYA IBRAHIM	1889-1955 51-188T-535T-53P
18~	EL'ADJ SEICOU NJIMOL'H NJUYA	1955-1977 56-188T-535T-53P

The rulers of the Bamoun people of Foumban, Cameroon.

Christian Missions

WHAT AFRICA LACKS, now that the colonists are gone, are the the systems called “infrastructure:” energy, transport, communication, medicine, you name it. The jury-rigs the colonists left behind have largely become unworkable—because of age, inattention, mismanagement and theft—and the resources to rebuild them are nowhere to be found.

In many parts of Africa the Christian missions stepped into the gap. They operated water systems, radio networks, even miniature airlines. When I was in Zaire in 1984 you couldn’t call out of the country because Mobutu hadn’t paid the international phone bill (despite rumors that he was the fifth richest man in the world). To call home you headed for the nearest mission, where their radio could patch you into the US phone system. When lake Nios burped poison gas in 1986, the surviving Cameroonians headed for the Baptist hospital at Foumban. And so on.

One remarkable feature of Christian missions in Africa was their mutual cooperation. Catholic and Baptist, Adventist and Mormon, all seemed to get along (mostly), and all helped one another. I believe it was because they had their backs to the wall struggling with a common foe—Africa itself.



Huts in a village near Jos, Nigeria. 1984.

be bought with hard currencies, were quickly disappearing from the markets.

Repairing a Rail Car. The train to Bauchi carried an ancient wooden sleeping car which was falling apart beyond redemption. The chain that was supposed to support the outer corner of my upper berth had come loose; when I climbed up there the whole assembly groaned and sagged, threatening to deposit me on the floor. So I extracted a loose screw from elsewhere in the car. Using the gimlet on my Swiss army knife, I installed the screw in the corner of the berth and rigged it to the end of the chain. It worked—I got a good night’s sleep.

At Home in Jos

The Jos plateau in central Nigeria was dry, dry, dry. The *harmattan* blew down from the Sahara, sucking the water out of your flesh. Christine and I stayed with Mensan Waclaw Kijewski and his wife, Anna. They were from Poland; he taught English and physics under contract at the University of Jos.

Anna boiled and filtered big pots of water, which we greedily guzzled down. They made their own Polish sausages and preserves. They had a papaya tree, which we raided every morning for breakfast. We ate well for a change.

A Land of Apples. While we were staying with the Kijewskis, the Canadian community in Jos put on a pageant—songs, skits, and a film about Canada. The show was nearly cancelled when a mob of Islamic fanatics came howling down from the hills, causing the police to talk about roadblocks and a curfew. But all quieted down and we went.

The film showed steel mills, supermarkets, highways, endless fields of grain. The African audience was ho-hum about it all. But then a single image threw the hall into pandemonium. It showed a farmer unloading a bushel basket of apples.

In Nigeria, it’s too hot to grow apples; they’re the ultimate foreign delicacy, available only rarely and at great cost. A young man proposing

At Home in Jos

marriage might give his intended an apple, wrapped in tissue paper, instead of a ring. Surely a country where they were handled by the basketful must have been rich beyond imagining!

The Shame of Nigeria. Primitive people still lived in Nigeria in 1984. Waclaw wanted to take us to a village he had visited some years earlier, where the women wore wooden buttons in their lips. He inquired first at the University and was told that the village no longer existed. Two years before, a camera crew had visited them; the result had appeared on national television under the title “The Shame of Nigeria.” Shortly thereafter the government had sent a truckload of soldiers, who had dispersed the villagers into the bush. Now there were only two old ladies left, who grimly refused to be photographed.

From the Abstract to the Concrete. Jos had a Chinese restaurant; the food was good, even though they had never heard of fortune cookies.

We lunched there one day and listened to Nigeria stories.

A law professor from the University told us about the Great Cement Scandal. A few years earlier, when oil dollars were plentiful, certain government employees had found that they could receive generous kickbacks by purchasing cement. Everybody jumped into the act, and a large part of the world’s supply of cement suddenly headed for Nigeria.

At one point there were 900 ships anchored in Lagos harbor, waiting to unload cement. With no way to store it or use it, the government finally threw up their hands; they told the ships to dump their cargos and go home. All that cement dropped to the bottom of Lagos harbor, where the tides smoothed it out. Later, a diver went down and reported that there was nothing else like it on this planet—a perfect concrete bottom for miles in every direction, like a humongous swimming pool.



Dyeing cloth in Kano, Nigeria. 1984.



A marketplace in Niamey, Niger.

The Emirate of Kano

Kano is 200 miles north of Jos, on the edge of the Sahel. In 1984 the Emir of Kano still held court there in a walled compound with his hundreds of wives and thousands of children.

As we were peering into the Palace gateway, the Emir suddenly left for an appointment. First an aged retainer in a blue robe came bounding out, like a skinny kangaroo, blowing an antique horn. He was followed by a brightly painted minibus full of women, with THE EMIR OF KANO bannered across its side. Enough wives to hold the guy for an afternoon, presumably. Then the man himself roared out in a black limousine, giving a clenched-fist salute to the guards. The whole entourage disappeared down the road in a cloud of dust.

Lunch at the Pool. The Magwan Water Restaurant was the only public swimming pool in Kano. The British left Nigeria with some odd nomenclature; sidewalk eateries, for example, became called “food hotels.” They specialized in such items as pounded yams and pepper soup. The “water restaurant” in fact served lunch. We ordered enormous dumplings with a spicy sauce and lumps of tough meat. Cow? Goat? We didn’t ask.

A Teabag in Time. The Lagos Express carried us south by west from the desiccated plains of Kano to the lush coastal swamps in 28 hours. This time we had a relatively modern sleeping car and a couple of Agatha Christies to enjoy in it. When I ordered tea, the dining car steward regretfully informed me that none was available. I produce a tea bag from my rucksack and life went forward.

At the Benin border, as Christine and I exited Nigeria, we passed another market full of smuggled goods. The state of our Foreign Exchange Control Form represented a small worry; after 12 days crossing Nigeria we could show only \$60 changed into *nairas* at the official rate. But the guards magnanimously waved us through. Their revolution had been accomplished, the military was in control, and the New Nigeria was about to unfold.

Battered Benin

Benin, the former kingdom of Dahomey, used to be a major entrepôt for the West African slave trade. In 1984 it struggled in the grip of a heavy-handed Marxist dictatorship, so in some ways things hadn’t changed that much.

Cotonou, the capital, was an unattractive jumble of crumbling buildings; the part of its population that was employed at all seemed to survive mainly on fishing. The suburbs were stiltvilles built over sandy lagoons.

Remembering the Past. Christine and I hastened inland, searching for the primitive country of kings, voodoo, and tribal battles. It was not hard to find. The old capital of Abomey, 90 miles inland from the coast, boasted such roadside attractions as a wall said to have been mortared with human blood. Abomey had also become something of an artist's colony, where local craftsmen made appliqué tapestries in the old style.

Each of the former kings of Dahomey had adopted a set of power symbols, which showed up in the modern tapestries. Mixed in with birds and sacred flowers were decapitated heads, just to show that His Majesty meant business. I bought a wall hanging decorated with a toothy lion—a symbol of royal power in its most traditional form.

Hanging Out in Lomé

Lomé, the capital of Togo, was one of those places you could comfortably hang out in. I think this was mainly because nobody *cared* about Togo. It was not on any list of strategic interests and its neighbors are too busy with their own problems to give it any trouble.

So the great central market bustled with brightly-robed ladies, who seemed to spend most of their time gossiping. In the cool of the evening a variety of hole-in-the-wall eateries served the West African version of French cuisine. For entertainment you could stroll the port, where huge bales of cotton were trundled up planks into the holds of rusting freighters.

The Scene at the Foyer. Christine and I stayed at the *Foyer des Marins*, a hostel nominally intended for sailors who were temporarily “on the beach.” The rooms had no air conditioning, but each one had a set of French doors opening onto a balcony, so the huge ceiling fan caught the breeze off the sea.



Weavers making kente cloth, a traditional craft of Niger. Niamey, 1984.

Travel Bumming: Central Africa



Washday on the Niger river at Niamey. 1984. How they made things clean in that muddy water remains a mystery.

North to the Sahel

The bar at the *Foyer des Marins* was half the reason to stay there. It was richly stocked with drifters of every nationality on earth, each with a different story to tell and plenty of time to tell it. I drank a beer with two Australian engineers, energetic young geeks who had just spent a week upcountry helping to install an electric generating plant. They were not sanguine about the future of their project. "Give it two, maybe three, years before it breaks down. No maintenance, you know." This was a story one often heard in Africa. No matter how much you preached the virtues of preventive maintenance, the energy just wasn't there.

North to the Sahel

France poured millions into the Ivory Coast to demonstrate how neatly a West African country could be run. The results, in 1984, were evident. Abidjan, the capital, was clean and prosperous. Its central market bustled, lacking only the vibrant color typical of markets in places like Lomé. Most importantly, however, Abidjan had

good French restaurants. Christine and I happily pigged out.

But we went to Abidjan mainly because it was the terminus for a train that ran northward to Ouagadougou. How could one resist taking the choo-choo to Ouagadougou, particularly when it also chugged through Bobo Dioulasso? Ouagadougou was the capital of Upper Volta, but a few months later they changed the name of the country to Burkina Faso, further advancing Central Africa's nomenclatural whimsy.

Unscheduled Detour. The overnight bus trip onward from Ouagadougou to Niamey was memorable. About one in the morning we were stopped by a pillar of flame on the road ahead, where a tank truck full of gasoline had caught fire. The driver had escaped, but the fire blocked the roadway. It had in fact melted a considerable section of asphalt, which was burning and flowing into the roadside ditches.

Our bus backed up as the driver searched for a side road. Finally we took a long detour through the bush and into a sleeping village, whose inhabitants woke up to the novelty of a



Christine poses in front of a bus in the bus park at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. 1984.

Travel Bumming: Central Africa



Men do most of the clothes washing in the Niger river. Niamey, 1984.

bus in the midst of their huts. It was instant party time. Everybody had to be told the story, sometimes repeatedly with embellishments. Beer appeared. After an hour or so, the driver decided there was no point in going onward that night, so all the passengers simply curled up on the ground between the huts and went to sleep. In Africa you go with the flow.

An Essential Nutrient. At dawn we saddled up and regained the roadway in the direction of Niamey. We had another eight hours to go, and the day soon got hot. The Sahara, a hundred miles to the north, had us in its sights.

Presently I started passing out. Christine managed to score a Coke at one of the stops, but it revived me only briefly. I was sweating like a sieve. I was barely conscious of going through the usual roadblock nonsense as we approached Niamey, where soldiers kept stopping the bus and demanding money from the driver. Finally we rolled into the city and I was half-carried into the Grand Hotel du Niger.

The desk clerk took one look at me and ordered a bowl of salt from the kitchen. I spooned it down as ordered and promptly woke up. It turned out that salt, being somewhat expensive, was regularly omitted from African cuisine. It had never occurred to me that you had to ask for it. So all the salt in me had gradu-

ally leached out and my body was in the process of shutting down.

Life on the Niger

Niamey, sprawled along the banks of the Niger, is the capital of the country of Niger, where French is the official language. The people are mainly Hausa, but it's the minority Fulanis and Touaregs that add the most color.

The Grand Hotel was a magical place. Its centerpiece was a broad terrace overlooking the river, beyond which the desert sunsets glowed orange, pink, and green. Maybe it was my state of dehydration, but I will swear that the local brew, *Bière Niger*, was the best in the world.

Lounging on the terrace, beer in hand, I gazed down on the broad Niger river. Right below the hotel was the only bridge for many miles, and it was busy 24/7. What a pageant! Trains of camels plodded down from the north, mixed with overloaded donkeys and the occasional horse. The people streaming across on foot were a mixture of Hausas in blue robes, round-faced Djermas, Touaregs with *cheiches* around their faces, and Fulanis, decked out in conical hats. On an island in the river, both men and women washed fabrics of every color in the rainbow, laying them out to dry on the sand like a brilliant multihued quilt.

Life on the Niger

Story of a Sword. After much negotiating in the market at Niamey, I bought a three-foot curved scimitar in a leather scabbard. During the ensuing months I carried that glorious object across the desert to the Mediterranean, all through Europe, and onto a World Airways flight that departed London for California.

Before 9/11, you could take a thing such as a sword onto a plane as cabin baggage, needing only to put it into the custody of an attendant during the flight. This I did, getting a receipt, but when the plane touched down in Oakland the sword was “nowhere to be found.” Today it doubtless hangs on the wall of some flight attendant’s apartment.

My negotiations in the market in Niamey were now mirrored by my negotiations with World Airways. The upshot was that they compensated me with a new round-trip ticket to London. In one sense it was a good deal, because I had paid only \$15 for the sword. But that piece of gleaming metalwork was a unique souvenir, which I had worked hard to acquire, and I would rather have had it back.

The Desert Imperative. In Niamey the living was easy, but after a few days it was time to get moving. The Sahara had to be crossed. So on March 26, 1984, Christine and I boarded a bus for the 450-mile trip northward to Agadez, where the road ended.

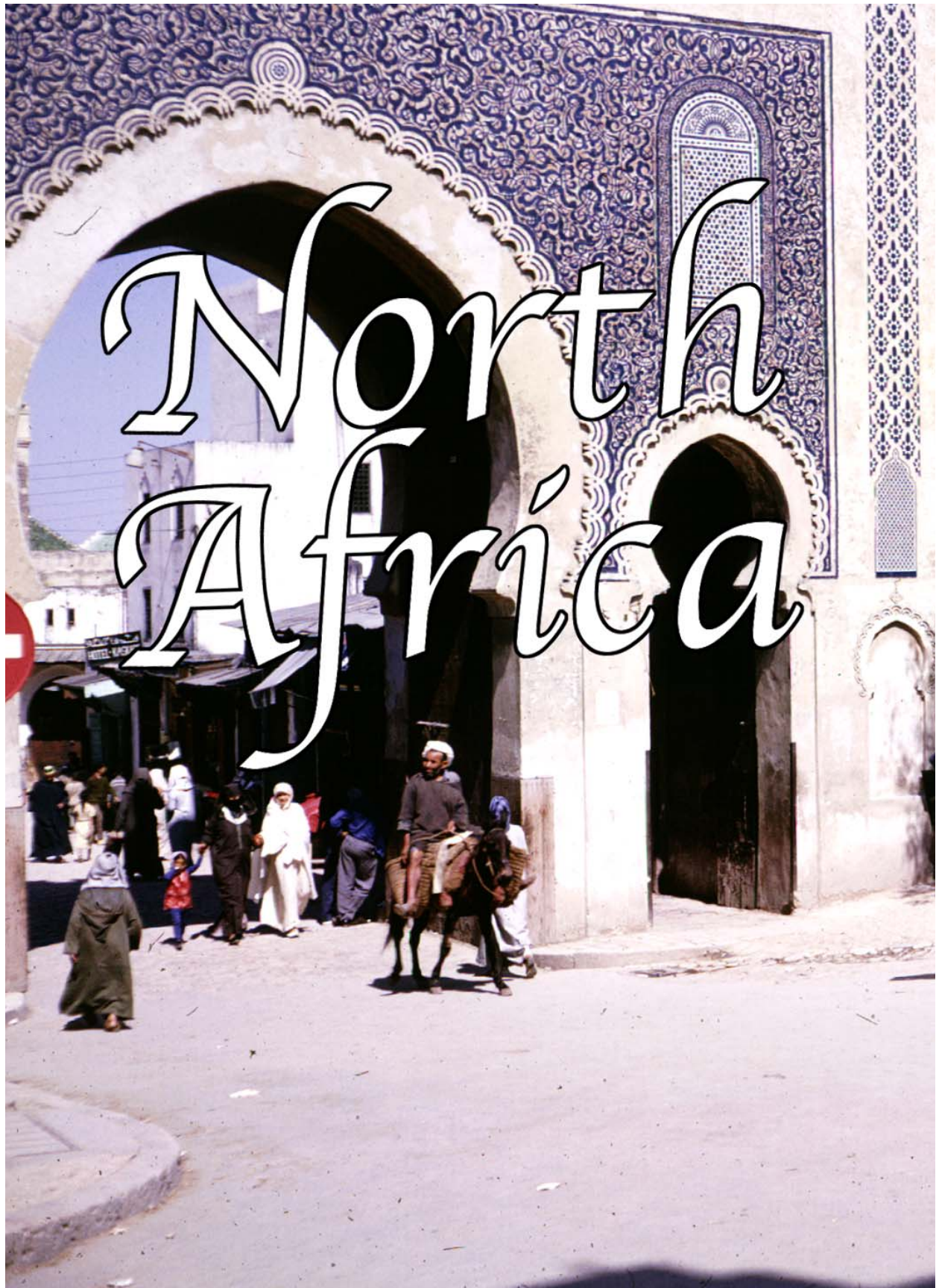
We were now definitely out of Central Africa. The landscape was parched scrub, the people were mainly Muslim, and the transport was mostly camel. The great African wetlands and savannahs were behind us, and the hot wind of the desert blew in our faces.

🚲 *The Sahara runs like a no-man’s land across Africa, separating the northern part from the rest of the continent. The only public carriers that cross it are aircraft flying at 30,000 feet. So the traditional way for travel bums to get to North Africa has been to go south from Europe, crossing the Mediterranean by ship. Nevertheless, in April, 1984, Christine and I headed for North Africa by way of the Sahara, crossing the southern part of that vast desert by truck. We went from Agadez in Niger northward to Tamanrasset in Algeria without benefit of a road. In some ways that trip was the ultimate travel bum challenge.*



Pots for sale in the market at Cotonou, Benin. 1984.

Travel Bumming: Central Africa



Travel Bumming: North Africa



A minaret of the mosque in Agadez, northern Niger. The muezzin no longer climbed a ladder inside—he used a loudspeaker. 1984.
Overleaf: A gateway into the Old City in Fez, Morocco. Needless to say, I bought a fez in Fez. 1967.

Cutting a Deal



The truck in which Christine Palmer-Persen and I crossed the Sahara from Agadez to Tamanrasset in April, 1984.

AGADEZ, IN NORTHERN NIGER, is connected by bus service along paved roads to Niamey and Kano, and thence to all of Central Africa. Similarly, Tamanrasset in southern Algeria is connected by bus to Algiers, Tunis, and Tangier, and thence to all the Mediterranean coast of Europe.

Between Agadez and Tamanrasset, however, lie a thousand kilometers of roadless desert, including some of the most forbidding landscape on the planet. Wells are infrequent, villages nonexistent. There is a track of sorts across this wasteland, marked principally by the stripped skeletons of vehicles that have died along the way. This is the route that Christine Palmer-Persen and I took in late March, 1984, travelling northward from Central Africa across the Sahara desert to the Mediterranean.

Cutting a Deal

There was no public transport between Agadez and Tam. A few well-heeled trekkers had made the trip in four-wheel-drive vehicles

loaded to the roof with spare tires and cans of fuel. Travel bums were left with the only alternative: buying seats in one of the dozen or so trucks that made the journey each week.

We arrived in Agadez early in the morning after an all-night bus trip from Niamey. It was a city built entirely of mud, including the hotel. We had been given a name to contact—Mr Mano Dayak, a general knower of people and arranger of things. We found his hangout near the market



The remains of a camel that didn't make it. Central Sahara, 1984.

Travel Bumming: North Africa



The camel park at In-Abangarit, an oasis in the Sahara. Camels are smelly, arrogant, and gross, but in the desert they're essential.

and were delighted to discover that he spoke some English. He sent his man out to search for a suitable ride.

Negotiating a Ride. We were scarcely settled in the hotel when we got results! Hamed, a Touareg driver, had just unloaded a cargo of Algerian dates and was ready to return empty to Tam. I inspected his truck. It was a ten-ton Berliet with an open box, fairly well maintained. The tires were all good.

We negotiated in English and Arabic through Mr Dayak. The going rate for the three-day trip, including food and water, was 20,000 African francs (\$50) each for seats in the cab. But having experienced Africans' predilection for inviting all their friends and relations to join them, we insisted that at no time should the cab be occupied by more than Hamed, Christine, and me. This included animals. More negotiations. We finally agreed to pay an additional 10,000 francs and Hamed agreed to disappoint the six cousins he was planning to invite to share our seats. We shook hands. Hamed proposed to leave at six that very evening, *insh'Allah*.

Although the deal included food, we scoured the market to lay by emergency supplies—tins of sardines, canned fruit juice, concentrated milk, etc. We also topped off our *bidons*, our plastic jerry cans of water. We arranged our packs so that sleeping bags and flashlights were

on top. We went to the police station and got our passports cleared for the trip.

We assembled at the truck at six. No Hamed. His friend said he was at the police station. Nobody knew what was happening, a condition travel bums sometimes call "African mush." Finally it appeared that the police wouldn't let Hamed start so late. All was rescheduled for the next morning. We returned to the hotel, just in time to have dinner up on the roof. We ate heartily and slept soundly.

Trucking the Sahara

We got up early and went to the truck. Preparations were well advanced. Bulging water skins, looking very hairy, were slung under the frame. A hindquarter of goat hung behind the cab. In the back were bedrolls and firewood. Two black helpers were destined to ride in the back: Abdul from Niger, Turay from Mali. They were both Hausa and spoke some French.

At nine the truck finally rolled. Here we got our first lesson in Touareg etiquette. Christine sat in the middle, so when I handed Hamed the money she passed it on, using her right hand. Hamed indicated that she was to place it on the seat. A minute later he picked it up and pocketed it. Touareg men never accept money directly from a woman's hand.

Trucking the Sahara

African Mush

"AFRICAN MUSH" WAS A TERM that travel bums occasionally used to describe the state of information on that continent. You asked the driver "What time does the bus leave?" He rolled his eyes and started saying, "Well, yes, I think maybe some time 'bout..., etc." The words that followed were African mush.

It was a cultural difference, not a disability. We expected the bus to conform to a timetable, so we could go off to find a snack without worrying that it would be gone when we came back. But for the driver, the bus was going to leave when everything was ready—when the baggage was loaded, the leaky tire had been patched, and the driver had eaten lunch. The future was complicated and inherently unknown, so why ask about it?

Seasoned travel bums learned to maneuver around African Mush. You analyzed the evidence, worked out a likely timetable, maybe hired a kid to go find you if the bus started to roll prematurely. When you went with the flow and didn't get upset, African Mush just became a part of life. It could even become comfortable. After all, if the future is unknowable then there's no point in worrying about it.

stopped for lunch. Sure enough, the water bubbled under its own pressure into a trench in the ground, creating a patch of green in the desert. The first part of the trench had been excavated into a bathing hole for people; the next part was a shallow trough for camels to drink from; the last part emptied into a kind of marsh for the goats. While we rested, trains of camels plodded in from all directions. They drank and made disgusting noises while their drivers gossiped.

While Hamed took a bath, Abdul and Turay prepared lunch. It was *ragout de chèvre aux pâtes*—goat stew with macaroni shells. Into the pot went onions, tomatoes, potatoes, oil, salt, peppers, and pieces of goat. Everything boiled for twenty minutes over the wood fire and then the macaroni was added. We sat on a straw mat, the pot in the center, each of us with a spoon. But first Abdul picked out the pieces of goat and set them aside; as we reached the bottom he judiciously threw them back in so everyone got an equal share.

Life in the Desert. After lunch, Turay prepared tea. It was very strong and very sweet, served in two-ounce glasses. The preparation ceremony involved much pouring from one container to another, raising the pot each time so the stream of tea arced through the air. A certain amount of tea disappeared into the sand, but it was fun to watch.

Thirty-five kilometers out of Agadez the paved road curved right, toward the uranium mines at Arlit. We left it and headed across the desert north by west. We were not to see tarmac again for 900 kilometers.

Here There Be Water. The landscape was still fairly friendly, with a few trees and dry scrub. The track was identified by a maze of tire marks across the sand. Our Michelin map showed four water holes between us and the Algerian border, 450 kilometers ahead. The first was marked *puits artésien bonne*; here we



Turay, one of the helpers on the truck across the Sahara, makes tea.

Travel Bumming: North Africa



I make friends in Ouarzazate, Morocco, a village on the edge of the western Sahara. 1967.



Dinner—a quarter of goat—hangs on the back of our truck.

Meanwhile, Hamed had been off doing business with one of the camel caravans. He returned carrying a surveyor's telescope, for which he had paid 10,000 francs. The fate of the surveyor to which it had belonged was not mentioned. Hamed probably sold it in Tamanrasset, whence it probably made its way to the market in Algiers.

We pushed onward. The desert was now rocky hardpan with a covering of sand. There were occasional stunted trees. Before we left the trees altogether, we gathered more firewood. Hamed ran over trees with the truck and Abdul and Turay tossed them into the back.

At the third water hole, Hamed met some friends and bought a live goat. It too went into the back.

At the last water hole, a desolate place called In-Abangarit, there was a Touareg encampment. Hamed acquired another goat, a young one, and handed it to Abdul. Abdul sharpened his best knife. The Touareg children danced around with delight, making throat-cutting pantomimes. Abdul knelt over the goat. There was a last gurgling bleat as blood spurted into the sand.

Touareg Etiquette

Half an hour later the carcass was dressed and hanging on the back of the truck.

Touareg Etiquette

At In-Abangarit we stopped for dinner. The menu featured goat stew again, but this time instead of macaroni it was served with fresh bread. While the stew was cooking, Abdul kneaded a large flat loaf of salt bread and baked it in hot ashes from the fire. It was delicious.

Here we learned more about Touareg etiquette. It appeared that we were below the salt, if not below the stairs. While Hamed was being entertained in camp, we dined with the servants. Hamed spent considerable time in the women's tent. Maybe he was courting? Anyway, it was plain that he found our presence in his truck slightly embarrassing.

Hamed returned to the truck late and we all turned in, spreading our bags in the sand on the downwind side. The goat in the back was brought down and tethered, where it bleated all night. Maybe it was reminiscing about its late brother. Well, it's a goat's life.

We rose at dawn, to breakfast on fresh tea and bread left over from the night before. As we left the Touareg camp, Hamed acquired two more goats.

Deep in the Desert

The map showed 275 kilometers of complete nothing between us and the border. Actually, there were several varieties of nothing. Sometimes the route was an utterly flat, featureless hardpan; other times we drove through fields of black volcanic rock. At one point we passed a series of sand dunes. Most of the landscape seemed totally devoid of life.

I learned to wrap a *cheiche*—a desert head cloth—which covered everything but my eyes. Besides protecting my skin from the sun, it strained out dust and helped trap moisture from my breath. Christine

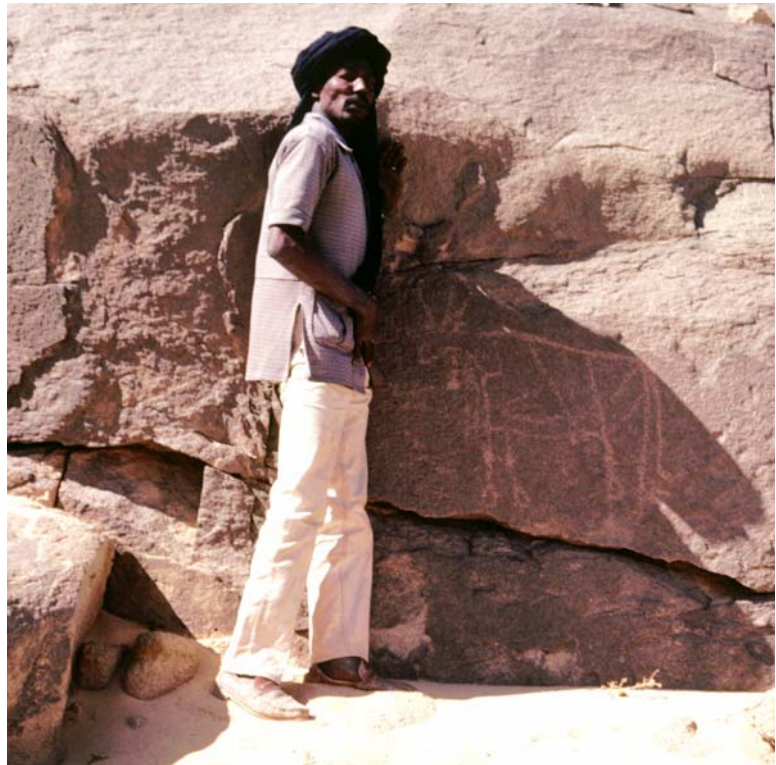
covered her face with a towel and wore a hat she bought in Togo. We thought we looked strange, but Hamed began to treat us more normally.

Hamed fancied himself the Great Touareg Pathfinder. Even where the track was well-defined he often left it and went hot-dogging across the desert. We left new tire marks where none existed before. When we got stuck in the sand, Abdul and Turay laid steel tracks under the tires and we crawled out.

A Saharan Border Crossing

Just before noon a cluster of trees appeared on the horizon and we soon pulled into the Niger customs post at Assamakka. We passed a row of cars with European plates parked there. Some had obviously sat for months, presumably because their papers were not in order. Our documents were all OK, however, and we were soon headed north again.

Halfway to the Algerian customs post a thorn tree materialized in the wilderness. We parked beside it and had lunch. Surprise! Goat stew again! I walked a hundred yards or so to



In the Hoggar mountains, Algeria, our guide shades a primitive rock drawing.

Travel Bumming: North Africa



Our route through the weird and forbidding Hoggar mountains of southern Algeria. 1984.

examine the bones of a camel laid out in the sand. That much exertion in the noon sun was quite enough—I spent the rest of lunch-time napping under the tree.

The Algerian customs post at In-Guezzam was the only man-made structure for the next 400 kilometers. It also had the only well and the only petrol. Hamed topped off the truck and refilled the goatskins. The plan was to drive right through, hoping to make the police barrier on the outskirts of Tamanrasset by 2 am. Hamed regarded it as *"trop dangereuse"* to sleep in the open desert. We cleared customs at the same time as another truck and traveled with them in convoy.

From there on the landscape was even bleaker than before. The sun beat down like a hammer. Nothing in its right mind would try to live there.

At dusk we pulled the trucks together and made dinner. Guess what was on the menu! The two crews sat around the fire and talked shop. Although they spoke in Arabic, they used enough foreign terms that I could follow the

thread. It was all about border posts, and which officials could be bribed and for how much.

Later, Christine and I were dozing in the bouncing cab when we were awakened by the cry *"Hey, touristes!"* The two drivers were tired and had decided to stop for the night anyway. We parked the trucks parallel behind some rocks and slept between them. The stars were extraordinary—I had never seen so many before, nor such vivid colors. The goats huddled together and remained silent all night.

Reaching Tamanrasset

The next morning we struggled up into the Hoggar mountains. The rock formations were weird and forbidding. Sixty kilometers from Tam we finally climbed onto tarmac and finished the ride in relative comfort.

The truck was not allowed to go into town. So Hamed dropped us off as close as he could get, which was about half a kilometer from the Tamanrasset tourist hotel. By this time, our normally compact backpacking equipment had degenerated into a pile of food bags, bidons, and

North to El Oued

miscellaneous packages. Three locals happen to be strolling by; after a bit of haggling I recruited them to help carry our stuff to the hotel.

Our entrance into the Hotel Tahat was magnificent. I was wearing my *cheiche* and the three-foot sword I had bought in Niamey. Christine wore her conical Togolese hat. Behind us wound a train of bearers carrying our baggage. We were dirty but triumphant. A French tour group, flown down from Algiers, goggled at us in the lobby. They doubtless had never seen real travel bums before.

North to El Oued

We spent the first week of April, 1984, at the tourist hotel in Tamanrasset, eating European food and generally refamiliarizing ourselves with the pleasures of civilization. Imagine, a sit-down toilet!

Although there was bus service from Tam north to Algiers, I had promised myself to go to the northermost point of the continent, which my map showed to be Cap Blanc in Tunisia. Besides, after trucking through the open sand it

seemed that viewing the desert from a paved road might feel anticlimactic. So each day I went down to the Air Algérie office to try to get on the next flight to El Oued.

The village of El Oued, hardly more than an oasis, lay in the northeast corner of Algeria about 40 miles from the Tunisian border. Getting transport there turned out to be a brutal process, for the plane was always overbooked. After several days of shoving and shouting, however, I must have earned the status of Obnoxious Infidel. At last the scowling clerk accepted my offering of *bakhsheesh* and sold me a pair of tickets for the next morning.

Into the Mountains

As we came to take the routine in Tamanrasset's Hotel Tahat for granted, Christine and I began to venture forth. The city of Tam, once Fort Laperrière of Foreign Legion fame, was unremarkable. But nearby, in the Hoggar mountains, there were primitive rock drawings. We hired a guide who said he knew where to find them and who also had a jeep that could get us there.



The hotel in ElOued, eastern Algeria. 1984.

Travel Bumming: North Africa



A primitive rock scratching in the Hoggar mountains.

A Picture Gallery. So we bounced off into the high desert and were soon lost in a maze of rock towers and twisted canyons. Eventually we came to several red sandstone boulders with light-colored drawings scratched into them. There were parades of realistic animals—of bovine ilk—plus the occasional stilt-like human being. I was struck by their similarity in spirit to the other paintings I had seen at Lascaux twenty-three years earlier.

Our guide had brought a jug of water, which he splashed on the drawings “to bring out the color.” We quickly put a stop to that. After being exposed to the desert for several thousand years, the drawings didn’t need any extra help toward becoming invisible.

Swimming the Sahara. Our jaunt into the mountains carried a bonus. At the end of a particularly twisty defile in the rocks lay a pool of clear, cold water! It was the first body of water larger than a goat wallow that I had seen for several weeks. In a trice I had shucked my clothes and was swimming to the other side. The guide was infinitely amused and I was as refreshed as I have ever been before or since.

Outdoing Thoreau. Getting deeper into desert exploration, Christine and I booked an overnight Jeep trip to Assakrem, site of one of the most isolated houses in the world. On top of a hill of flinty rock, surrounded by utterly barren desert, a man named Charles de Foucauld built a little hermitage in 1911. He was sort of a late-blooming travel bum, having previously been a French cavalry officer and then a Trappist monk. But after roaming the Sahara for many years, he decided at the age of 53 that Assakrem was where he wanted to retire. If his goal was to Get Away From It All, he certainly succeeded.

Seeing the Sea

A short bus ride across the border from El Oued took us to Gafsa, Tunisia, where I rented a car. The “rental agency” was strictly a home-grown operation—the car was practically a wreck, and I was to return it to the agent’s brother at his apartment in Tunis. But it ran.

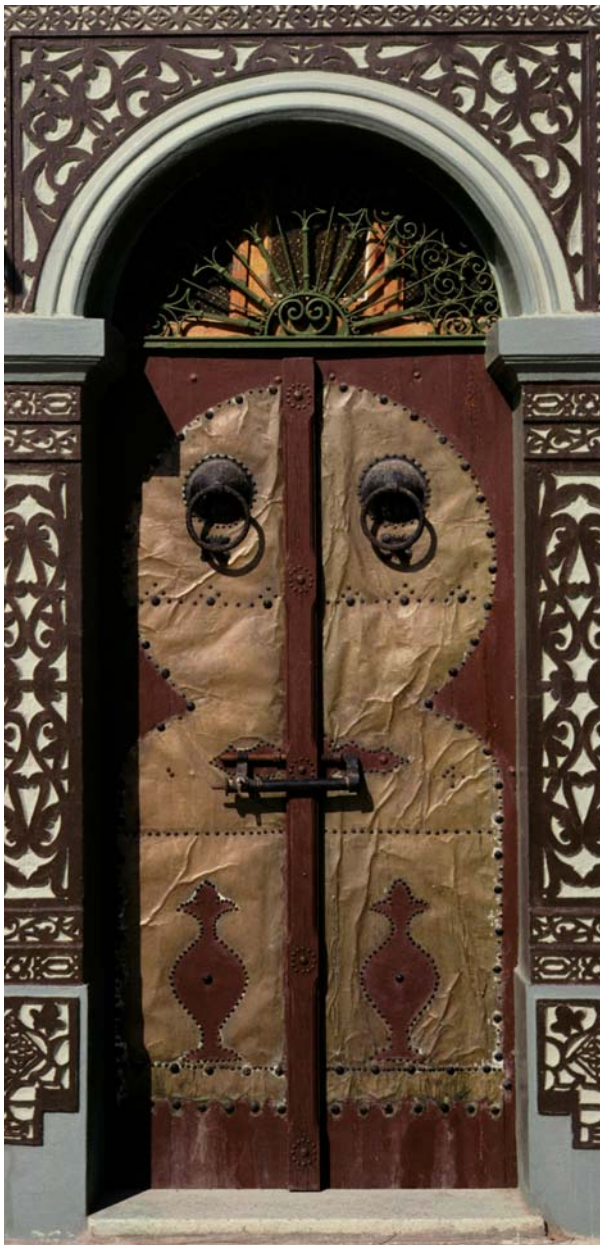
I particularly wanted to see the Kasserine Pass, which figured prominently in the story of the North African campaign of World War II.

Seeing the Sea

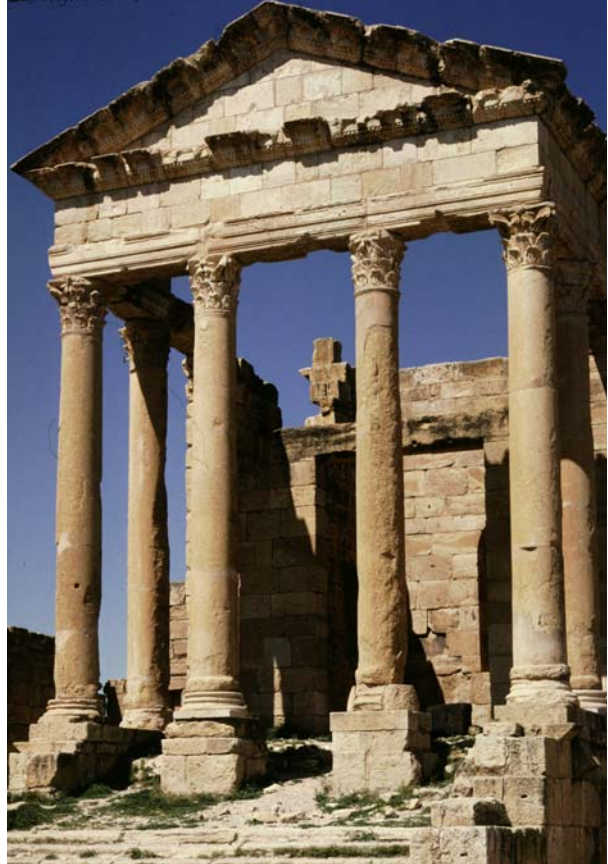
There was a commemorative plaque by the side of the road, and the whole ambience was as spooky and wind-blown as it was portrayed in the film *Patton*.

On the way we stopped at the Roman ruins of Sbeitla, spread out in the sun and utterly deserted. The Romans left cities all over North Africa, many of which are well off the usual tourist routes.

The Doors of Kairouan. We looped to the east so we could stay a few days in Kairouan,



A fortified door in the old city of Kairouan, Tunisia. 1984.



A temple to an unidentified Roman god. Sbeitla, Tunisia, 1984.

the spiritual center of Tunisia and home of one of the most vibrant *souks* in North Africa. We were not disappointed. Christine shopped for a carpet while I admired the old city and the dozens of mosques.

It turned out that one of the best features of Kairouan was its doors—beautiful assemblies of wood and metal decorated with scrollwork and hand-made nails. They were a legacy of the days when survival could depend on securing your house against bandits and their kind.

“Home” At Last. Our wanderings northward through Tunisia finally brought us to Tunis, the site of ancient Carthage. At last, the Mediterranean! After seeing the old Greek harbor, we took a balcony room in a seaside hotel and drank in the warm April breezes. It felt like coming home; after all, Sicily was only 140 miles away. We were that close to pizzas and European trains.

There was still the matter of my vow to reach the northernmost point of Africa. The place was called Cap Blanc and it was near Bizerte. We

Travel Bumming: North Africa



The main square of Tangier in 1967, just outside the walls of the Old City. You can see a small archway into the Casbah, top center.

drove there, only to discover that the actual cape was on a naval base, guarded by barbed wire. But we found that we could climb down to a small beach about 500 yards to the west. That seemed close enough, and so we claimed it as the terminus of our length-of-Africa trek.



The cloth market in Marrakech. 1967.

The Magic of Tangier

April of 1984 was not the first time I had been to North Africa. In April, 1967, before rusticing in Southern France, I took the train to Algeciras, Spain, and hopped over to Gibraltar. From

Algeciras it was a short ferry ride to Ceuta, a detached bit of Spanish territory on the African coast entirely surrounded by Morocco.

Gibraltar turned out to be stuffy and uninteresting, but Ceuta was next door to Tangier, one of the world's fascinating cities. The tourist map of Tangier showed a large white space in the center, labeled simply "Old City." It was the "casbah" of Hollywood and Charles Boyer. I soon discovered why there were no streets shown on the map of the Old City: its layout was an utter rabbit's warren, without any apparent plan.

Come Wiz Me to ze Casbah. The Old City was surrounded by a wall

The Marrakech Express

with a dozen or so gates. Inside, the spaghetti-like streets twisted about, often no wider than a few feet, snaking in and out between shops. Sometimes the route from one street to another ran down a few steps, into a tunnel, and out through an archway.

Although little boys constantly pestered you to be your guide, the best way to see it all was simply to wander about. Eventually you would find a gate and pop out through the wall. Meanwhile, the shops and street vendors offered all the sights, sounds, and smells that you could desire from the Mysterious East.

Tangier was so entrancing that I went there again in 1972, reveling once more in its tortuous charm. Since then, I have heard, it has become dirty and crime-ridden. Alas! Another treasure of quaintitude bites the dust.

The Marrakech Express

On the same trip, in 1967, I took the train south to Marrakech, another fascinating city. Along the



Flying Wallendas they weren't, but these guys attracted a crowd in Marrakech.

way I stopped in at Fez and Meknes, ancient fortified cities with pleasantly complicated *souks*. Needless to say, I bought a fez in Fez.

Friday evening in the Djemma-el-Fna, the great central square of Marrakech, was like something out of the Middle Ages. Story tellers, jugglers, and fire eaters vied for attention as the crowds milled about the food booths. Tumblers climbed on each other's shoulders, building



A story teller spins his tale—complete with background music—in the Djemma-el-Fna, the great central square of Marrakech. 1967.



An apartment building in Algiers. 1973.

human pyramids. Elaborately dressed water vendors jangled their brass pots, although it might be all your stomach was worth if you actually drank their product.

I spent half an hour listening to a story teller. Although his tale unfolded in Arabic, you could pick up the gist—trust, suspicion, betrayal, conflict, revenge, satisfaction. Inflection and body language, it seems, are universal media.

A Day in Ouarzazate: In Marrakech I met a Belgian travel bum. He wanted to see the High Atlas mountains, so we rented a car and spent a day driving eastward to Ouarzazate. The city itself was too clean to be interesting, but by

driving a bit farther we began to encounter some genuine oases. It was my first taste of the Sahara. That day planted in me the idea of traveling across the great desert, a project that matured exactly 17 years later.

Business in Algiers

Between my first taste of Morocco, in '67 and my full-scale trek across the Sahara in '84, I took another peek at North Africa. This was in 1973 and the reason was business.

My company had been perking along, selling automatic weather stations in both South Africa and Australia, among other places. A large contract was brewing in Algeria, with enough promise to justify my traveling there. First, however, I had to stop in Geneva to see a sales agent who allegedly had an inside track to the Algerian ministry in charge of this particular procurement.

All things considered, what made sense was to take a two-week business flight around the world, with stops in Switzerland, Algeria, South Africa, and Australia. I added a couple of days on the island of Mauritius, between Africa and Australia, to deal with jet lag and to see some jungle.

One complication was that six years earlier the US had severed diplomatic relations with Algeria. Landing a million-dollar contract would normally involve the good offices of our commercial attaché on the scene, so I wondered how that was going to play out. But off I went.

The connection in Geneva turned out to be hokum—the agent's main claim to fame was that he was related to President Bongo of Gabon—but I learned that Algiers contained something called "the Swiss Embassy for US interests." Obviously some sort of diplomatic dodge was in the works.

Business in Algiers

Embassy Games. I landed in Algiers late at night, and the next morning I stepped into a taxi in front of the hotel. “The Swiss embassy for US interests,” I intoned, as if I knew where I was going. The driver sped off and we soon arrived at a large compound with a Swiss flag flying from the flagpole. I walked in. Inside was a US Marine guard and the complete staff of a full-blown American embassy. Apparently when we cut off diplomatic relations we had just pulled down Old Glory, ran up the Swiss flag, and continued onward, never dropping a paper clip.

I made my pitch at the Algerian ministry. Whether it was my wretched French or the charade with our embassy, we never got the

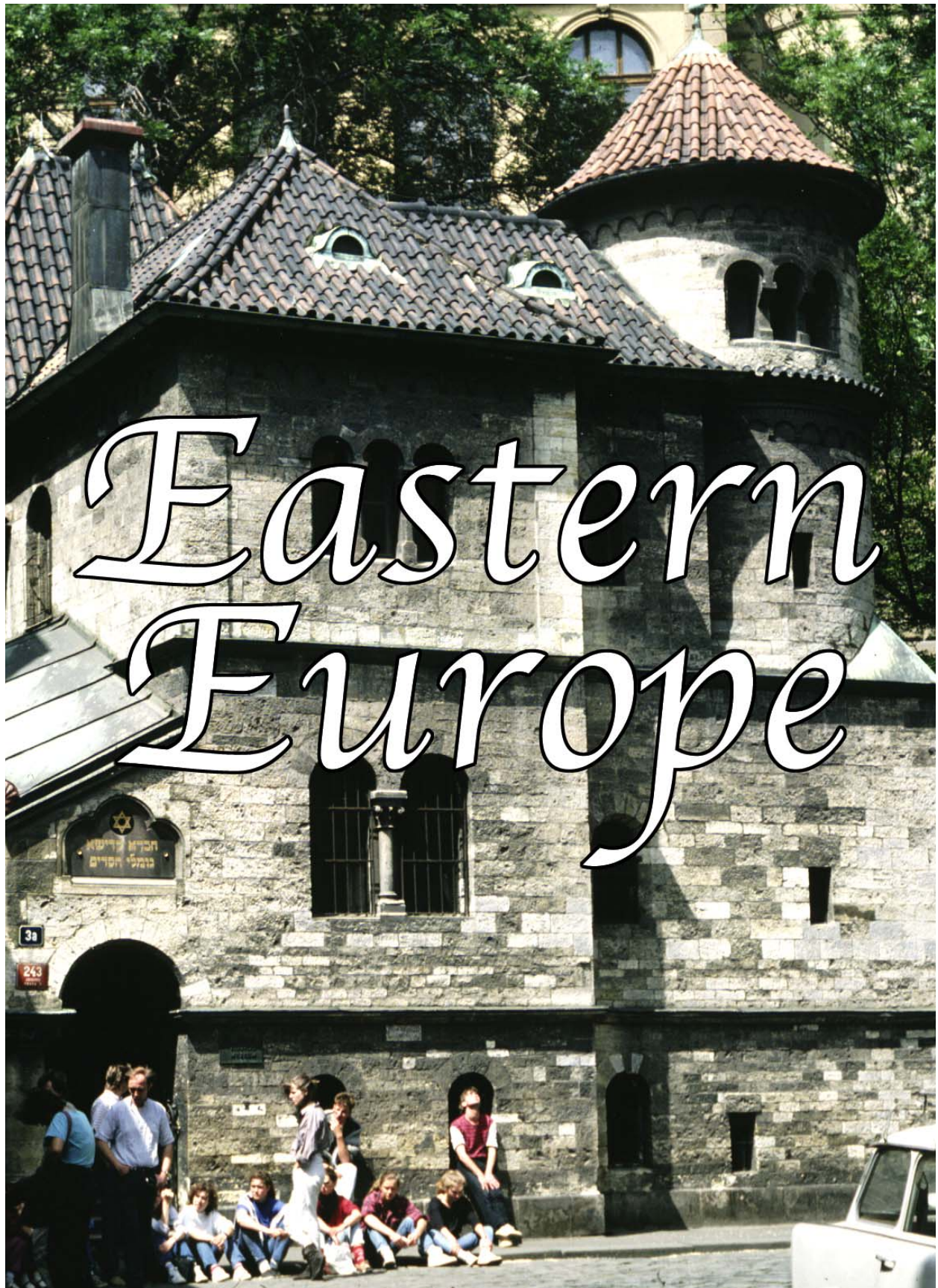
contract. Later I heard that it went to a German company. But this trip gave me an opportunity to see a bit of old Algiers. I even ran across the true Swiss embassy—what you might call “the Swiss embassy for Swiss interests.” It was a second-floor walkup down on the waterfront. But at least it was the real thing.

🚲 *In April, 1984, Christine and I left Africa by boat, sailing north from Tunis to Palermo and taking the train up through Italy. She flew back to the US, while I went eastward to Steyr, Austria, where I bought a used car. I had promised to meet Joann Malina and her mother in Paris in June, with the object of taking a drive through Eastern Europe.*



Hundreds of platters are laid out for display in a brassware shop in the bazaar at Tunis, Tunisia. 1984.

Travel Bumming: North Africa



Travel Bumming: Eastern Europe



A shop window in East Berlin, 1961. The reflection in the glass mirrors the bombed-out building across the street.
Overleaf: Synagogue in the old Jewish quarter of Prague. 1984.

Bumming the Balkans



The cathedral in Sofia, Bulgaria. 1961.

EASTERN EUROPE always held a sinister fascination for me. I imagined it a land of gypsies, of vampires, of mad scientists holed up in spooky castles. During most of my life, Eastern Europe was also a land of totalitarian regimes. Genuine travel bumming was almost impossible, because the overbearing governments regulated your every movement. They also wanted to be paid in good Western cash at virtually every turn.

Since 1990, of course, all that has changed. The former “people’s democracies” have thrown open their doors and are falling all over each other to excel at capitalism. American campers hike the Tatra Mountains while neo-hippies hang out in Prague. But before 1990 it took a certain amount of guile to move about as a travel bum behind the Iron Curtain. One exception was Yugoslavia, which was Communist in theory and Capitalist in practice.

Bumming the Balkans

Having had my fill of Istanbul in February, 1961, I took the train westward to Sofia. Bulgaria was

my first “Iron Curtain” country, so as the train wound through the forest toward the border I peered out the window to catch my first glimpse of what Communist life was like. Suddenly I realized that we must be there—by the side of the track walked an aged woman, all in black, leading a pig on a leash.

Sofia was strange. The people had a uniformly grim look and their clothes were all gray and baggy. Loudspeakers were everywhere, in the streets and in the shops, playing music punctuated by commercials. From the odd words I could understand, the spoken messages seemed to be political exhortations. This stuff went on all the time and you couldn’t turn it off.

Soon after the train entered Bulgaria, a short muscular man showed up in my compartment and plopped down opposite me. In passable English, he proceeded to quiz me about where I came from and where I was going. Hearing that I was a poor travel bum, he hauled out a 10 *leva* note and gave it to me. To be polite, I accepted it. As he got up to leave, his jacket fell open and I noticed that he carried a small nickel-plated revolver in a holster under his arm.



The bridge in Sarajevo on which Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was offed in 1914, precipitating World War I.

Communism Lite. At that time, the ancient Balkan states that stretched westward between Bulgaria and the Adriatic were bundled together under the name Yugoslavia. Tito, the strongman who had managed this conglomerate since 1945, was called a Communist but hardly acted like one. You could easily get a visa into his country, and once there you could move about freely by train.

In some ways it was a travel bum's paradise. The coast was sunny, the people were friendly, and black-market Yugoslavian dinars made living amazingly cheap. An added attraction for me was that the women were European and good-looking, not the walking duffle bags I had become used to seeing in the Middle East.

War and Remembrance. Tiring of the downbeat atmosphere of Bulgaria, I crossed by train into Yugoslavia at Dimitrovgrad and headed west to Sarajevo. I wanted to see the spot where Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary had been plugged, precipitating World War I. Sure enough, there was the very bridge and at one end of it was a little museum.

Certain niceties surrounded the starting of wars in 1914, unlike the *blitzkrieg* tactics of 1939. In the museum cases were some of the actual cables, written in French—"the government of so-and-so has the honor to inform the government of such-and-such that after midnight a state of war shall exist, with respectful good wishes, etc." For all I could tell, they could have been singing telegrams.

From Sarajevo it was a scenic day's train ride through the mountains and down to the coastal city of Dubrovnik, a marvel of Balkan quaintness. Everywhere were cobblestone streets, grill-work balconies, and pots of geraniums. Though it was February, the little outdoor cafes were flooded with sunlight. I loaded up on cheap pastries and studied my Italian phrase book.

A Riviera on the Cheap. The *Jadrolinia* ferry boat that ran northward along the coast was impossible to resist. It stopped at ports with wonderful names—Korcula, Hvar, Zadar, and Cres—and ended up in Rijeka, the gateway to Italy. I bought a deck passage ticket and laid out my sleeping bag amid the ropes of the fo'c's'le.

Bumming the Balkans

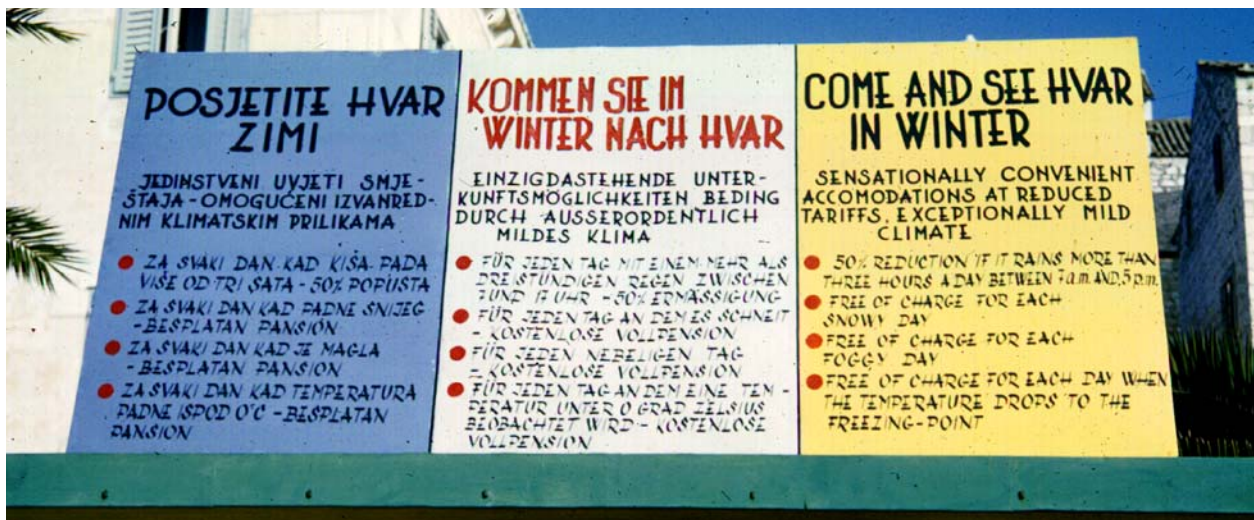


The marvelously romantic old city of Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, 1968.

The sea was a glorious deep blue, the sun satisfyingly hot, and the ship was filled with Slavs on holiday. The ports of call were ancient walled cities that had been fitted out with colored beach umbrellas and ice cream stands. To top it off, the Communist government, in an act of socialist hubris, undertook to guarantee

the weather; if it rained your hotel room was free. What a deal!

Roman Times. Seven years later, traveling eastward from France into Asia, I made a point of detouring along the same coast. This time I took the ferry from Rijeka to Split, an old Roman watering-hole, and headed inland to Belgrade,



This sign greeted you when you stepped off the boat on the island of Hvar, on the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia. 1968.



A fruit and veggie market in Rijeka, Yugoslavia. 1968.

there to catch the Simplon-Orient Express for Istanbul.

Split was filled with antiquity. Diocletian had built a palace there, the better to enjoy the warm breezes off the Adriatic while torturing Christians in his dungeons. The ancient dungeons were open for touring, although they were in a very tumbled-down state. So were the city baths, where the Romans presumably rested themselves after a hard day at the thumbscrews.

The city of Skopje, in southern Yugoslavia (now Macedonia), was another must-see—five years earlier, in 1963, it had been destroyed by a massive earthquake. The railroad station was a ruin, the clock on what remained of its facade frozen at 5:17 am. The rest of the town was still filled with rubble, but it was amazing how rapidly it was being rebuilt. The bars, I was told, had revived almost immediately, followed by the restaurants and open-air markets. First things first.

An Egg in Istria. German travel bums, in particular, seemed to gravitate to Yugoslavia, presumably because it was both cheap and nearby. I shared a train compartment with one during the trip over the Istrian mountains from Rijeka to Trieste. We stopped to change trains at

a nameless junction up in the hills and went into the station restaurant for lunch.

The menu was written entirely in Serbo-Croat, but that didn't faze my Teutonic friend. He knew how to wring the last dinar's worth of value out of the locals. While I dumb-signed the waiter to bring me something good for about fifty cents, Fritz went into a deep study of the menu. With an exclamation of triumph, he located the word for "egg" and pointed the waiter to the cheapest egg dish. I think he expected to get a simple omelet.

The waiter brought me a bowl of delicious beef stew and a slab of bread. Then he placed a small saucer in front of my German friend. With elaborate ceremony, he broke into it one raw egg.

Gripped in a massive struggle to keep my face straight, I congratulated the German on obtaining the most inexpensive lunch I had ever seen.

Busted in the East

In 1961 it was expensive to visit East Germany. You couldn't just go in and bop around; you had to book a tour through one of the Communist

Busted in the East

state agencies, who always demanded a large amount of hard currency up front. Nevertheless, a few travelers told me they had been successful with the “transit visa ploy,” so I decided to give it a try.

My East German transit visa was intended to let me take the train from West Berlin straight through to the Czechoslovakian border, *ohne aufenthalt*—without stopping. So when I stepped off the train in Dresden, East Germany, my cover story had to be that my command of German was too flimsy for me to understand what the words *ohne aufenthalt* on my visa meant.

This fantasy actually sustained me for a couple of days, during which I toured the city of Dresden (largely rubble) and took in the *Gemäldegalerie* in the old palace. But about sundown of the second day, while loitering innocently on a downtown corner, I was nailed by a suspicious Schupo. “*Papieren, Papieren,*” he shouted, and it was all over.

Into the Gulag. I was handed up from cop to soldier, from soldier to sergeant, from sergeant to officer. Each uniform was more elaborate than the last. Finally I was driven through a series of massive steel gates to an office where sat a man



The East German transit visa that got me busted in Dresden.



In 1961 the bombed-out buildings in East Berlin were tastefully decorated with friendly political advice.

in a tropical sports shirt. I realized that I had reached the top.

He phoned around, to see if my name was on anybody's list. No bad news. Then we recited the same formula several times: “*Sie sind ein Journalist, Ja?*”; “*Nein, Ich bin ein Tourist.*” His aide poked through my pack, discovering only stuff no respectable journalist would carry. By now it was late at night and it became clear that this high-level cat was getting tired of playing with such an uninteresting mouse.

So four soldiers, carrying machine guns, formed a square and marched me through the deserted streets of Dresden to the train station. They put me on the midnight train to Prague and one of the soldiers squatted outside my compartment, blocking the door.



The Berlin Wall, 1984.

This was the first time in many train rides that I had enjoyed a compartment all to myself, so I slept peacefully. At dawn the train exited East Germany and I was awakened by the sun rising over the sweet-smelling meadows of Bohemia.

Driving Through The Wall

Twenty years later, in June, 1984, I rendezvoused with a Mensa friend, JoAnn Malina, and her mother in Paris, our destination being Eastern Europe. I had bought a used car in Austria—an elderly Opel—and I wanted to see the East while it was still under the Russian thumb.

After a few days of eating and sightseeing in France, we drove in my car to Berlin, Warsaw, Czestochowa, Krakow, Zakopane, Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, and finally Vienna. The mother, Ann, had been raised in Chicago by Slavic parents; she spoke fluent Bohemian and could communicate in Polish and several Czech languages. This unlocked insights we could never have gained from bus tours or the canned commentaries of government guides. Although

we only scratched the surface of Communist Europe, we got a good idea of what was going on underneath.

The first thing everyone said to Ann was how much they hated the Russians. This sentiment



Opinions differ about what this Polish road sign means. Some say it's an advertisement for the Ku Klux Klan; others say it points to a Capuchin Monastery nearby.

The Evil Empire

was in bizarre counterpoint to the ubiquitous public monuments that celebrated “Russian-Czech Friendship” (or Russian-Polish, or Russian-Hungarian). People walked stolidly past these soulless stone piles (which were typically topped by a cast-iron Russian soldier supposed to be “liberating” them) but their thoughts were hardly friendly.

The Good American. I got a taste of the status of Russians in Eastern Europe one day in Czestochowa, Poland. We were staying near the monastery of Jasna Gora, which houses the “Black Madonna” icon traditionally said to have been painted by Saint Luke. It was a focus of pilgrimage for thousands of Poles every day, and one of the few places where they felt free to say what they thought. Thus when I was standing out front, framing the building with my camera, a woman in a black overcoat walked up to me and started loudly racking me up and down in Polish.

Ann was not there to translate, so after a minute of verbal abuse I replied, politely, “I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you’re saying.” Pause. Consternation. “*Ruski?*” asked the woman.

“*Nie Ruski,*” I cried, uncorking my Instant Slavic and pointing to myself, “*Amerikanski!*”

She fell all over herself with remorse. Suddenly nothing was too good for me. Perhaps I would prefer to take a picture from a better vantage point. Was there any way she could help me enjoy my visit in Poland? All this by tone and gesture, but the import was clear. Down with Russians, up with Americans.

The Evil Empire

Reagan got dumped on in 1984 for referring to the Russian role in Eastern Europe as an “evil empire.” What a nasty thing to say, when we were trying so hard to get along with the Kremlin! But I came to feel that the phrase was remarkably apt. The Russians were promoting their interests in their neighboring countries far more ruthlessly and insensitively than the nineteenth-century colonial powers ever did in Asia and Africa. They were patently exploiting the Slavs—confining them to menial work, stealing



A monument to Czech-Soviet friendship. Prague, 1984.

the fruits of their labor, controlling their means of expression, and crushing them with tanks when they complained. And they were getting away with it.

It has been said that the Soviets recapitulated British history a hundred years later. Thus they dropped the Iron Curtain over Eastern Europe about a hundred years after Queen Victoria proclaimed the British Empire. Their mastery of ICBM warfare was cognate to Britannia’s ruling the waves, and offered similar support to their colonial policy. It is ironic that a single upheaval, World War II, finished off the last British colo-



A tribute to the Bohemian Pig-Stickers Guild. Prague, 1984.

nies about the same time that it engendered the new Russian ones.

Practically everyone Ann talked to said they would like to leave or make it possible for their children to leave. This universal desire to “vote with one’s feet” was the ultimate rock on which the Soviets’ claims of democracy and freedom broke up.

We heard a joke about the Russian Ivan, who goes traveling in Eastern Europe and sends back postcards regularly to his friends in Moscow. For a while the messages are all the same: “Greetings from free Poland”; “Greetings from free Czechoslovakia”; “Greetings from free Hungary.” Then there is a hiatus. After a few weeks comes the last postcard, this time from Vienna: “Greetings from free Ivan!”

Defending the Wall. Certainly passing out through the Iron Curtain was an unnerving experience, and a vicious insult to people who produced the likes of Chopin and Curie. As we stood in a forest of concrete and barbed wire, the ploughed no-man’s land stretching away on both sides to the horizon, guards with machine guns examined our papers minutely and

stabbed the cushions of my car with needles, looking for stowaways. This was the way out of paradise?

A grotesque sidelight on classical Marxist-Leninist theory was the way it was used to support the Russian Empire. Because the socialist state incurred such an investment in raising the individual to be a productive worker, ran the argument, it had the right to hang onto him until he paid it back. The government became a vast Company Store to which every Czech, Pole, and Hungarian owed his soul.

We drove through towns in which factories stood on one side of the road and vast, gray apartment complexes on the other. Thus it was easy for the workers to shuffle between their homes and the dark, satanic mills in which they paid their dues. One is reminded of the debt-ridden Irish and the poverty-locked Indians about which Marx wrote so vehemently. What might he have said about the “Marxist” countries of Eastern Europe if he had toured them after World War II?

Making Colonialism Work

The British Empire claimed a certain measure of civilizing strength. Look, they said, at railroads where there were only footpaths, hospitals in the bush, modern science replacing dark superstition. The Soviet Empire also made such claims, but nobody outside the propaganda mills believed them. Instead, the fundamental Soviet strength stemmed from the way they made it much more comfortable to go along with them than to raise trouble (as Reagan did).

You could see this effect graphically by comparing living conditions in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Where a popular revolt had been more recent, conditions were more harsh. Thus the Hungarians, who had been “going along” since 1956, were the most fortunate—they had plenty of good food, music in the cafes, and a certain amount of freedom of

Making Colonialism Work

speech. The Czechs, who unloaded in 1968, were next.

The least fortunate were the Poles, who were still restive after the Solidarity dustup of 1981. Although their fields were full of crops and animals, everything got loaded into Russian trucks, which clogged the roads going eastward. When vegetables arrived at a street market, people dropped whatever they were doing and queued up. The message was this: make trouble and you get trouble.

Poles Apart. Polish restaurants typically had one pot cooking in the kitchen, usually potato stew. Nevertheless the waiter would greet you with an elaborate menu, filled with descriptions of succulent dishes that were never available. This practice seemed to be a manifestation of the legendary “indomitable Polish spirit.”

But the Poles were nothing if not practical. One June day in Wroclaw, I was getting out of my Opel as another car pulled alongside. Bang went my door, making a small ding in the side of my neighbor’s car. He was a man in his twenties, speaking only Polish. We stood in the street and surveyed the damage.

It was clear that I owed him something, but it was unclear how much. It didn’t seem appropriate to turn Rich American and pull out a wad of dollars or zlotys. Suddenly I had an idea. In my baggage were a couple of pocket calculators that I had brought from America as gifts. They had cost me less than ten dollars, but I offered him one as compensation for the damage.

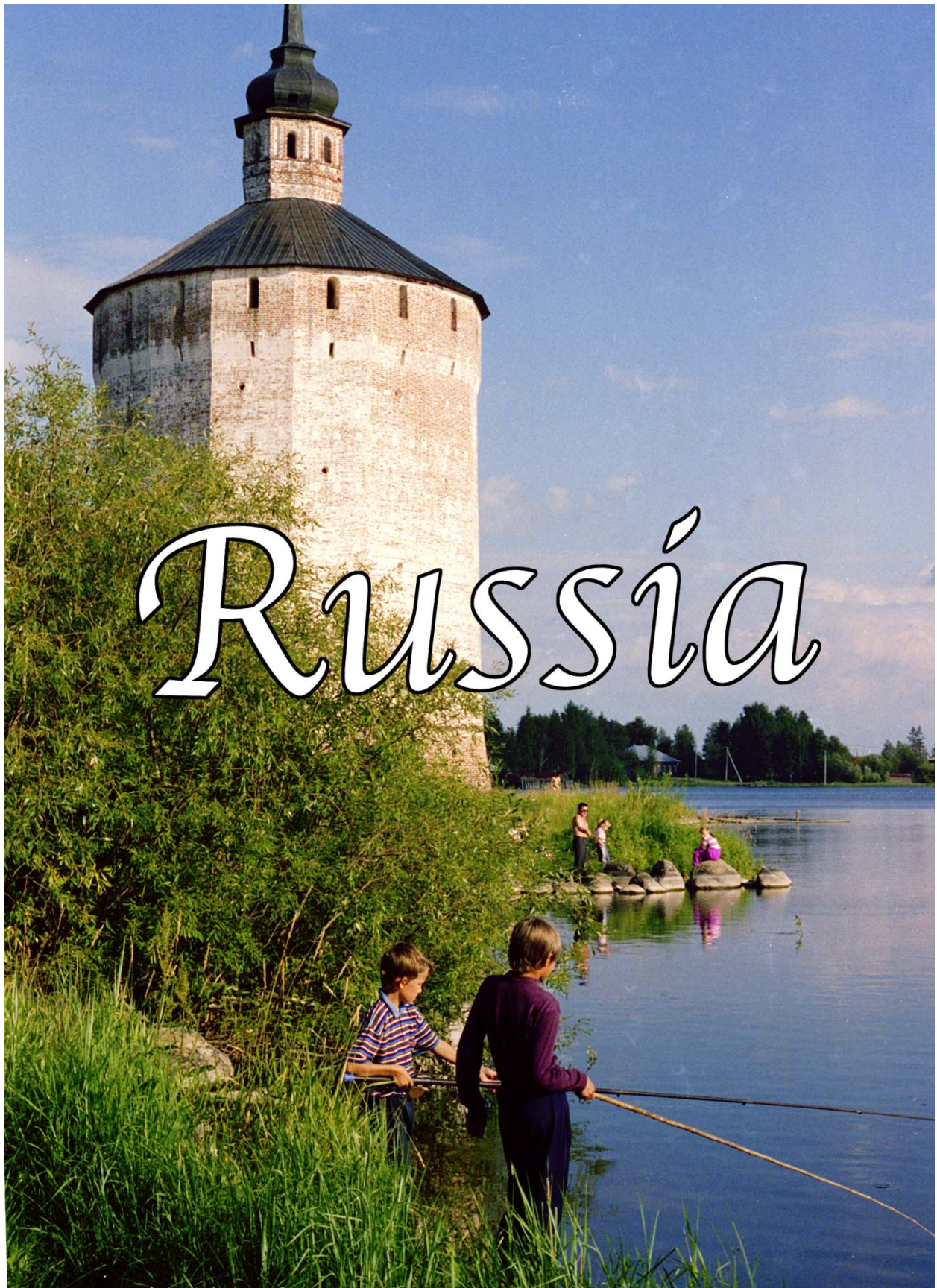
Bingo! He was delighted. Despite having no language in common, we promptly became great buddies. We parted in the street with many signs of mutual admiration.

🚲 *Over the years, my forays into Eastern Europe had whetted my desire to see Russia, the mother lode of Communism. But it was always too expensive and difficult to get there. Finally I managed it in 1997. Dany and I took a ten-day trip on an inland boat through the rivers and canals that connect Moscow with Saint Petersburg. By then, of course, the Communist Party was over, but we still managed a timeless glimpse of Russia and her people.*



Not everything was grim in Eastern Europe. Here’s the scene at an outdoor cafe in Warsaw, 1984.

Travel Bumming: Eastern Europe



Travel Bumming: Russia



One of several intricately built and carefully preserved wooden churches on Khizhi Island in Lake Ladoga, northwestern Russia.
Overleaf: Outside the monastery of Saint Cyril in Kirilov, north of Moscow. The boys are fishing in a branch of the Volga River.

Russia on the Cheap



A busy vegetable market in the town of Kostroma, northeast of Moscow. The tomatoes looked good to me, but these women seemed to have had their doubts. August, 1997.

DURING MOST of my travel bumming days I danced around the USSR. To go there you had to sign up with Intourist, the government travel agency, whose charges per day exceeded my usual budget for a week. It was possible to circumvent the problem, using dubious permits and black-market money, but you risked ending up in the Soviet gulag.

Russia on the Cheap

Günther, a German travel bum I met in Pakistan in 1960, described how he had trekked eastward from Berlin into the Russian heartland. He had obtained a transit visa to go through Russia to Afghanistan; this kind of visa assumed that he would stay on the train and therefore freed him from the attentions of Intourist. But Günther had never intended to stay on the train.

At the exchange bureau in the Berlin train station he had bought a huge wad of roubles for a few deutschemarks and had pinned it in his underwear. It was currency that Russians fleeing to the West had been forced to sell for whatever they could get.

Let Me See the Money. In those days, trying to enter the USSR with Soviet currency could mean serious jail time. But apparently the guards at the Terespol border post didn't feel like exploring Günther's *lederhosen*. They looked at his transit visa and waved him in.

Once safely inside Russia, Günther spent his illegal roubles lavishly, having a high old time in Moscow, Kiev, and points south. He finally got on a plane in Tashkent for the short hop over the mountains to Kabul. But before leaving Soviet airspace, the plane touched down at a military airfield for one last examination of documents.

In theory, Günther was supposed to have arrived in the USSR with lots of good Western money, exchanging it in the state bank at the absurdly inflated rate of \$1.29 for each rouble. On entry he had been given a "currency control form," which bore spaces for the authorities to record each transaction. Günther still had his form, but it was utterly blank.

In the exit hall, a *muzhik* with a huge fur hat and a Kalashnikov rifle demanded to see the currency form. Günther's knees began to tremble as he rehearsed his cover story—he had



A Russian river boat passes a village on the Volga River.

hitchhiked, people had given him food, “I really didn’t need money during my month in your socialist paradise,” etc.

The guard stared at the form. Then he turned it upside down and stared at it again. Then he carefully folded it and placed it in a box. He smiled and waved Günther back to his plane. Never have I seen a German so grateful to get to Afghanistan.

Into the Heartland

To visit Mother Russia itself I was forced to wait until 1997, after the Soviet regime had dried up and blown away. But moving around in the vast countryside beyond Moscow and Saint Petersburg was still difficult. The solution was to follow Russia’s intricate system of inland waterways, centered around the Volga River of song and story. Dany and I booked a cabin on a river boat, along with our friends, Peg and Martin.

The *M.V. Andropov* pushed deep into the heartland, tying up at places such as Uglich, Kostroma, and Yaroslavl. This itinerary was what I had waited for; after 50 years of watching my country shadow-box with the Bear, I was eager to see real Russians in their native habitat.



The Moscow MacDonalds. I believe that the end of Communism in Russia began with the opening of this establishment. 1997.

Into the Heartland

My immediate impression was that of stolid, hard workers, inventive and practical but with a spiritual streak, incredibly short-changed by a feckless government.

More Money Games. In 1997 Russians lived with a dual monetary system. Roubles were the official currency, but they sold for 6,000 to the dollar and were still depreciating. Dollars were preferred, and the government supported their use. It was a far cry from the 1960s, when you could be thrown into Lubyanka Prison for trading Western money. We carried crisp, new, tens and twenties, as the snap of fresh US paper seemed to be a sought-after quality.

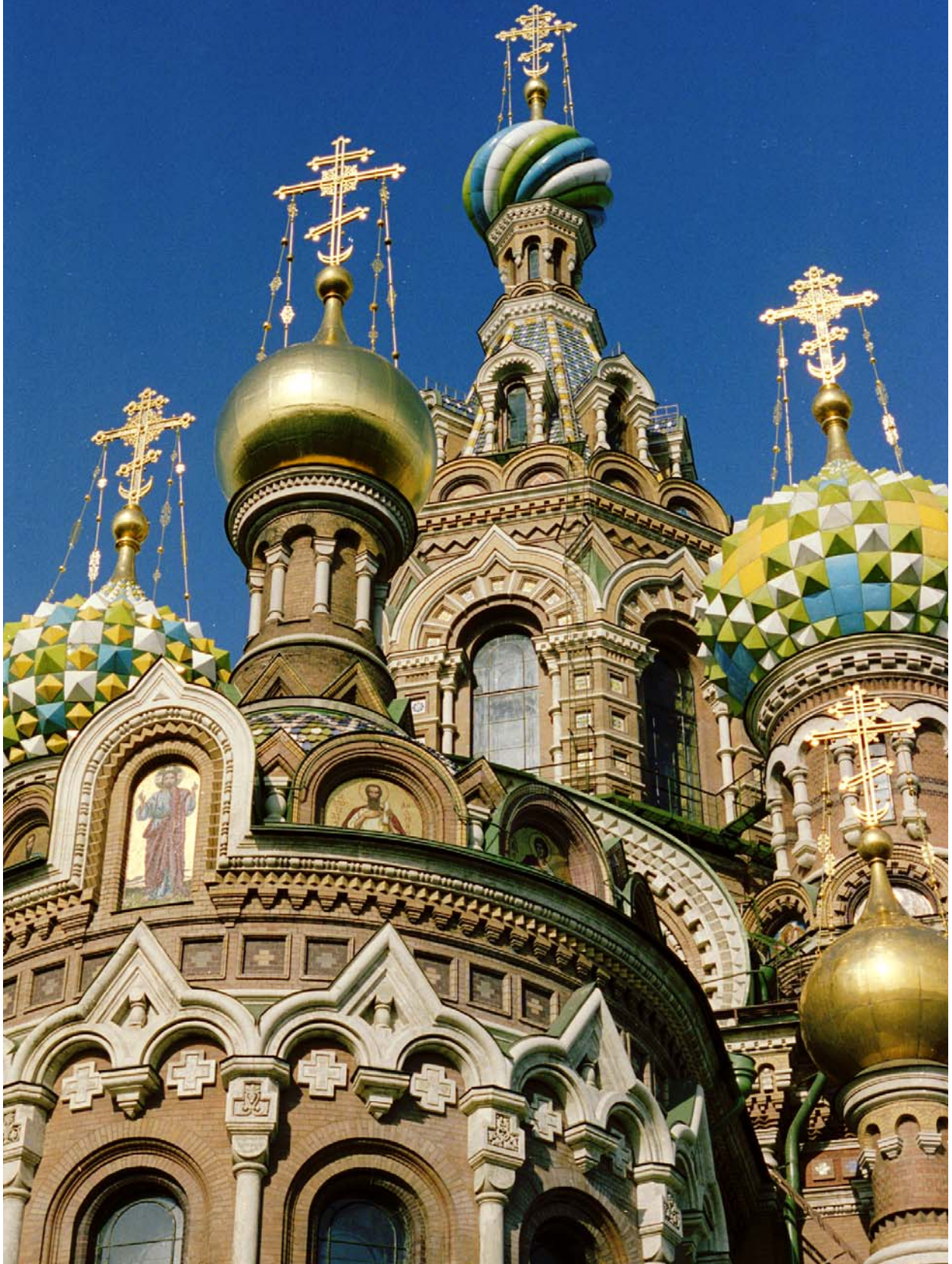
Driving outside Moscow on a Saturday morning, we saw rows of people standing by the side of the highway, waving rolls of clear polyethylene film. This material was widely used in Russia, particularly



Mother and daughter at home in a Russian village.



Lining up at a kiosk to buy milk.



The Church of Our Saviour of the Spilled Blood, built on the spot in St. Petersburg where Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881.

for enclosing temporary greenhouses to stretch out the short summers. It turned out that the factory that made it was nearby, and like many enterprises formerly supported by the state it had run out of money. Each Friday afternoon the workers were paid with rolls of film, and they spent their weekends converting these “paychecks” into cash.

Life in the Ex-USSR

Opinions differed on the quality of life aboard the river boat *Andropov*. Dany thought the food was gross, but I enjoyed its unabashed Slavic honesty. Fragrant fish stew, an occasional head or tail bobbing up, was served with slabs of heavy brown bread and glasses of iced vodka. We learned to sing out the appropriate Russian toasts as we slugged the stuff down.

It was a cut better than the lunch I saw a workman carefully unload from his metal box: a pickle, a potato, and a flask of vodka.

Ahh, vodka; it was everywhere. Kiosks on the street sold it in 125 ml bottles, and people with nothing better to do would simply sit down on the curb and consume a bottle. It was cheap, too. I was told that getting dead drunk is a characteristically Russian pastime, and that this powerful, odorless booze was concocted just to make the journey to that state as rapid and uneventful as possible.

The New Legalities. Although it may have been an exaggeration, we were told what typically happened after the Communist state was formally abolished. Ivan, who has lived in his flat many years and paid a nominal rent to some state bureau, goes down to that office to see about acquiring title.

He finds a room full of officials who still draw their pay but who now have no clear idea of what they are supposed to be doing. Having armed himself with several bottles of you-know-



The church of Saint Sergius at Zagorsk, north of Moscow.

what, Ivan enters into amicable negotiations. The officials, taking a liking to him, find a piece of paper and write, in large baroque letters, “Ivan Ivanovich, having lived for 20 years on the third floor of number 16, Nevsky Street, says he now owns the place.” They root around and find a box of rubber stamps, untouched since the 1920s, to decorate the document and make it look official.

Ivan carries this piece of paper away and stores it in a safe place. As far as he (or anyone else) is concerned, he is now a legal property owner.

A Date in the East

My train trip across Baluchistan with Bill Bradley and Günther Vierow, in November, 1960, is recounted on page 85. When Günther and I parted in Shiraz, I promised to look him up in Berlin—which is what I did, six months later. Günther had just lucked into the loan of a choice flat in the Lietzenburgerstraße, owned by a journalist friend who was off on assignment. We settled in to a life of travel bum luxury and and pooled our resources.

In 1961, before The Wall, Americans like me could pop in and out of East Berlin just by stepping off the U-bahn at the Friedrichstraße station. Günther, being West German, did not have this privilege. So we traded deutschemarks for eastmarks at one-to-five and he sent me off shopping in the East. I returned to the West with



A strolling musician pumps his squeeze-box on a promenade overlooking the Volga.

a week's supply of Polish hams, Bohemian cheeses, and Bulgarian wines, on which we dined like kings. In the evenings I sampled our host's library and tried to claw my way through Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in German translation.

Was Bedeuten Freiheit? It was possible for Günther to make brief trips to East Berlin, but as a West German he had to apply for a 24-hour visa well in advance. Before the East-West split, his girl friend had grown up with a girl named Monica, who had "gone east" and was now an officer in the Communist Women's Youth Brigade. We decided to set up an evening with Monica and her boy friend, a director of socially progressive plays, at their apartment in East Berlin.

Because of the cost of phoning from west to east (the call had to be routed through Paris and Moscow), I was delegated to go to the Friedrichstraße station and ring up Monica from an East Berlin phone booth. I made the connection, got my German verbs in a row, and managed to set up a party date.

It was a memorable evening. Monica's little studio was packed with her East German friends, many of whom had come just to see a genuine Capitalist Running Dog. We made a stab at the usual discussions of Art and Literature, but the crux of that evening's dialog centered around the abstract question *Was bedeuten Freiheit?*—what do we mean by freedom?

For these Communists (and they were all true believers), our Western notions of individual freedom were illusory. We were always part of society, which intruded upon our every act; so the question was, How do we form society so that it best satisfies our needs?

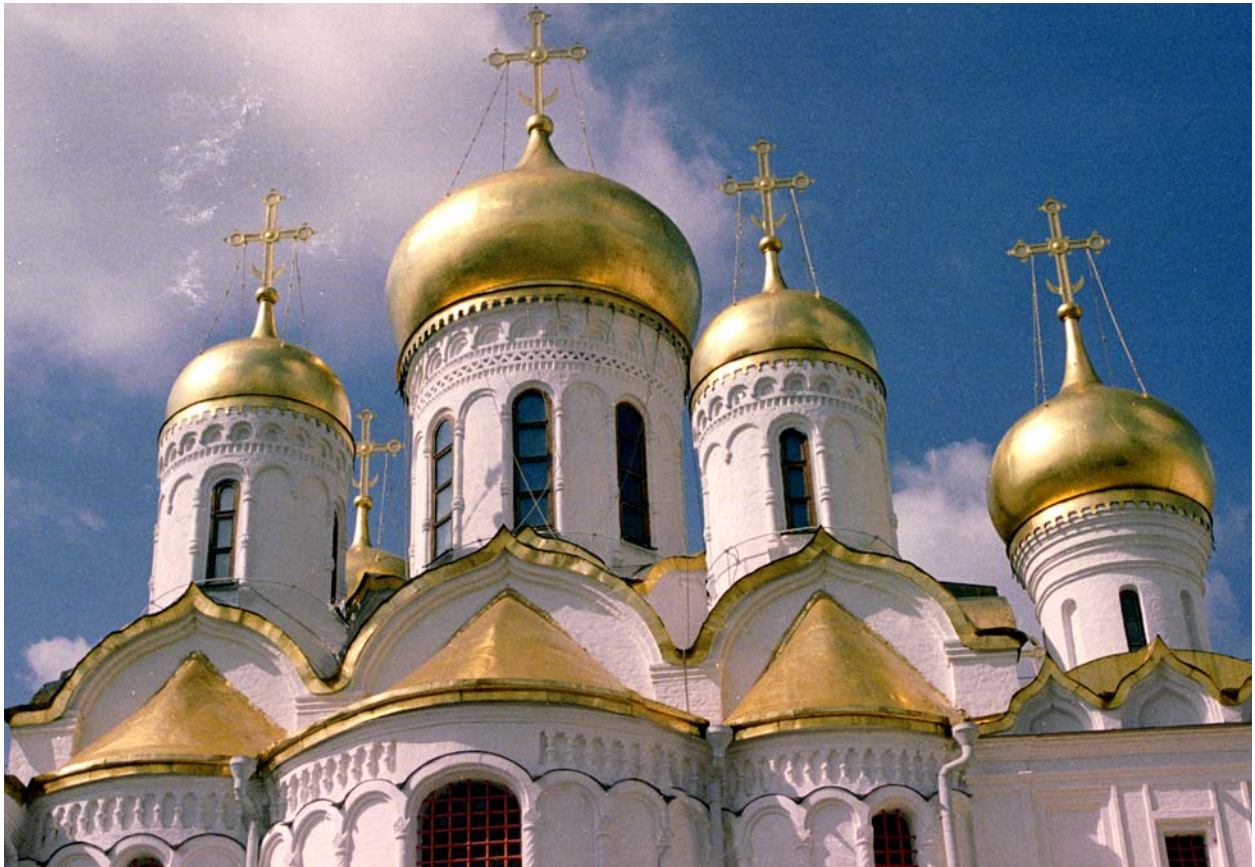
The answer, for them, was planned socialism. Make human living the goal of life, not money. The fact that socialist planning wasn't working too well in Russia and Eastern Europe, they felt, was only a temporary glitch in an otherwise sound concept.

I'm afraid that my capitalist rebuttals, fueled by frequent applications of *schnapps*, were dialectically weak. As a result, I left with a greater respect for Communist theory than I had had before.

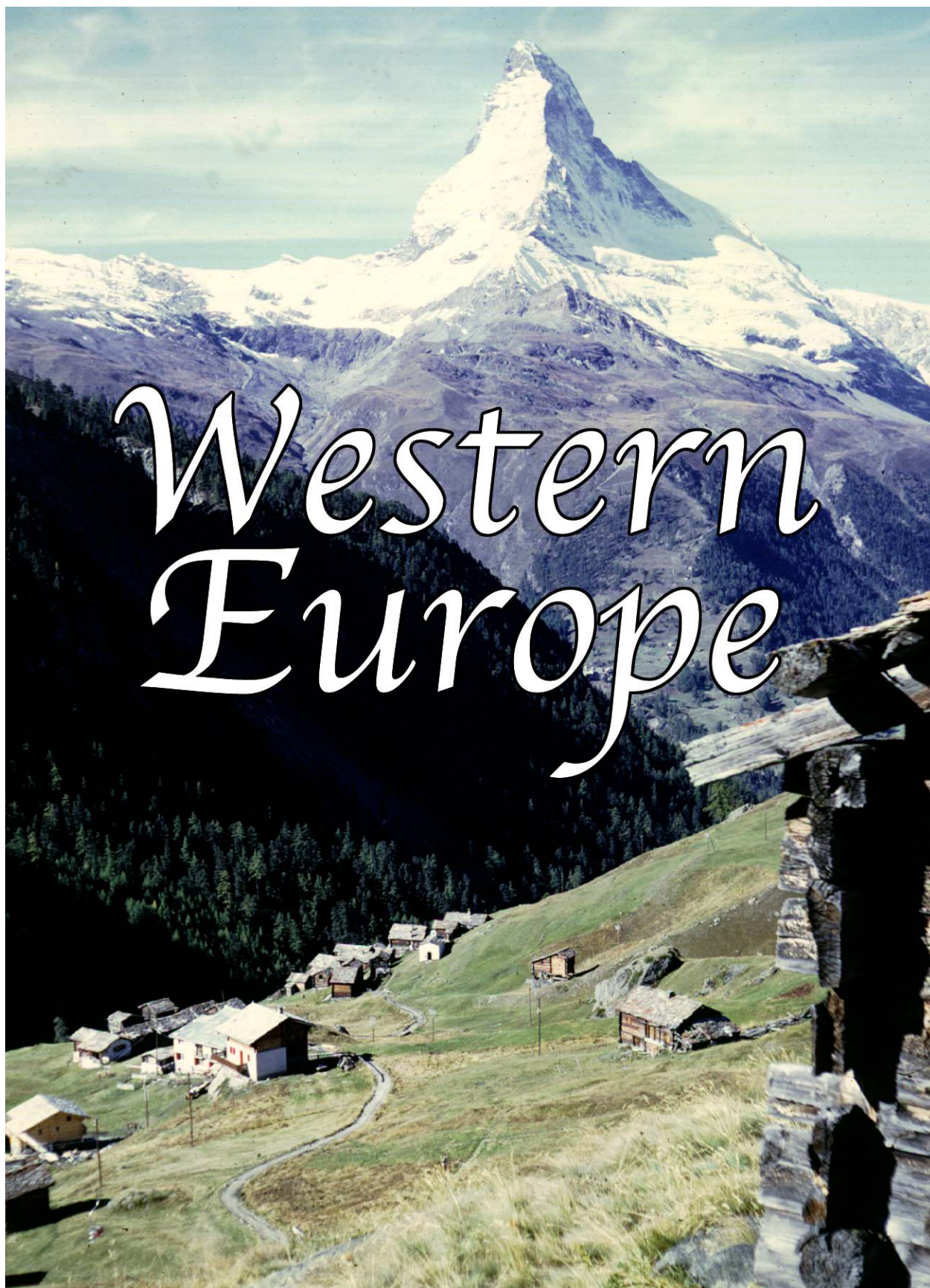
A Date in the East

Thus, in a sense, my spending an evening in East Berlin helped me first understand the intellectual forces that had formed modern Russia. Visiting the Russian heartland 36 years later only added a kind of post mortem to that understanding. During the intervening years the Soviet experiment—a noble but wrong-headed vision—had melted away in the crucible of practical reality.

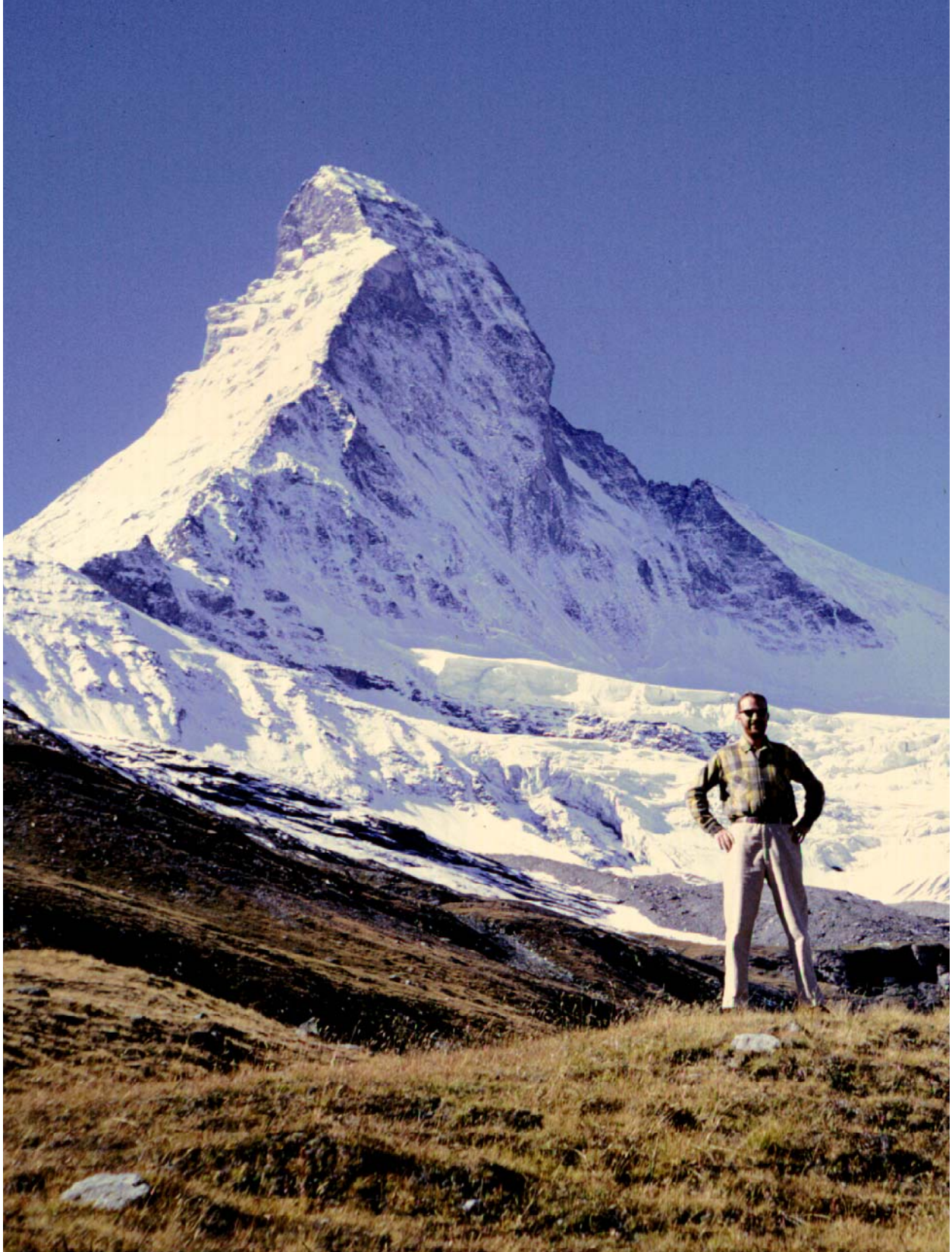
🛵 *When I bummed around the world westward in 1960-61, Europe was as much a destination for me as Asia. In the event, it took me five months to cross Asia and another five months to see Europe. The Communist countries of Eastern Europe were a check-off item, but my main goal was to get to the fat lands of the West. My entry point for Western Europe was Trieste, on the border between Slovenia and Italy. There I bought a motor scooter and happily drove it twelve hundred miles through Italy and France.*



More Russian gold onion domes, this time from the Cathedral of the Annunciation, Moscow. Gotta love those domes!



Travel Bumming: Western Europe



The magic of perspective makes it appear that I am preparing for the final assault on the Matterhorn. Zermatt, Switzerland, 1967.
Overleaf: A more distant view of the same mountain, taken from a hiking trail in the Swiss alps.

The Grand Tour



A panoramic view of Salzburg, Austria, as it was in 1961.

MY TREK WESTWARD across Asia in 1960 and '61 involved mostly public transit, but as Europe glowed on the horizon I yearned for something more personal. Chugging through the mountains of Yugoslavia on a series of local trains, I studied an Italian phrase book and dreamed about buying my own wheels in Trieste.

Sure enough, the used Vespa parked in the back of a *moto di occasione* shop seemed to have everything. It cost \$83, it could weave in and out of traffic at 60 kilometers an hour, and it burned gas by the teaspoon. 1961 predated the age of autoroutes, so it was perfectly reasonable to tour Europe over two-lane roads. Scootering was the way to go.

The Gas Coupon Racket. It turned out that scootering could even be lucrative. In those days, the Italian government maintained a coupon scheme to relieve foreign motorists of the heavy taxes on gasoline. American passport in hand, you could buy five-liter *coupones* from the Auto Club of Italy for about 40% off.

But here was the gimmick: if there was some gas left in the last coupon after filling your tank, the service station gave you a cash refund at the pump price. That meant I could drive the Vespa for an hour, refill the tank with a third of a coupon, and get back a cash refund of more lire than I had originally paid for the coupon. The profit was minuscule, but it felt good to be actually ripping off some of the officialdom I had been sparring with for the last six months.

The Grand Tour

So starting in February, 1961, my Vespa and I did the Grand Tour. We putted down the Italian boot to Naples and Sorrento, then turned northward along the coast. We did the basics—Venice, Rome, Florence, and the hill towns of Tuscany—then roared through Monaco and burst upon the glories of France.

Belles Artes. The Uffizi Gallery and the Pitti Palace in Florence turned me on to Renaissance art. So that's why people paid millions of dollars for a single painting! The power of a room full of



The Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Italy, 1974. The gallery running along the top of the bridge connected the Uffizi and Pitti palaces.

Leonardos followed by a room full of Botticellis was so overwhelming that I had to stare at a blank wall for a while to clear my head.

After 1961 I came back to Florence at every chance. Eventually I became a regular customer of the big *ottico* on the *Piazza della Signoria*, where I bought eyeglasses for \$12 a pop.

Bien Manger. Italian food was just a meal, but French food was a revelation. Regardless of whether I was scootering through the Vaucluse or the Dordogne, I could stop at the most unprepossessing roadside diner and eat a lunch that would have had the gourmets in San Francisco lining up for blocks. The simple things were the most astonishing. Crisp lettuce leaves in olive oil and a touch of vinegar; *radis au buerre*, radishes served with slabs of sweet butter; a hardboiled egg transformed by freshly made mayonnaise—nothing in my steak-and-potatoes upbringing had prepared me for these sensations. And it was all amazingly cheap. I wrote home that after I died from overeating I wanted to be buried next to a French restaurant. Meanwhile I started gaining weight.

Hosteling. In Europe I stayed a lot in youth hostels. For 50 cents a night they gave you a clean dormitory bed (bring your own sheets) and a hot shower. The best ones were in Austria and Germany, although the Italian hostels tended to be the most romantic.

Falling asleep one night at the Florence hostel, located above the city on the Viale Augusto Righi, I heard a Brooklyn accent, unmistakably female, wafting in through the barred dormitory window.

"Bernie," she wailed, "let me in."

"I can't," came the reply from within. "It's after hours and they've locked the door."

"But Bernie, I've got diarrhea."

There, etched in the clear night air, was the essential difference between being a travel bum and being a tourist in a Hilton.

Well, Bless Me

Having done Bethlehem for Christmas in 1960, it was logical for me to do Rome for Easter. The timing was right, too, because Easter in 1961 was

early—April 2nd—and I had started scootering down the Italian boot on February 25.

I had met a priest at Assisi who advised me that finding a bed in Rome over Easter was going to be a Big Problem. He gave me a note of introduction to a cloister on the Via Francesco Daverio, where the nuns took in visiting priests. With my red beard and all, I could hardly pass for a Catholic priest, but he said it would be OK anyway. Sure enough, Sister Maria peered at my note through the peephole of the door and let me in.

I bunked in an 8-by-10 cell with a real priest, who clued me in to the ritual. Mumble some words while the Rosary is being said, eat all your bean soup, and get in by curfew. It was clean living as only the Church knew how.

As long as I was living the clerical life, it seemed appropriate for me to arrange an audience with the Pope. I and about twelve thousand other people were led in a side door of the Vatican and stood in a series of huge halls as John XXIII was carried on a throne over our heads. He duly issued his blessings, starting with any relics we had brought with us and working his way up to our relatives and to ourselves. The Pope, true to his name, was the essence of fatherliness. Yet he looked pasty and unhealthy, and in fact he had only another couple of years to live.

Salami and Holy Water. After Easter I scootered down to Naples and Sorrento, there to soak up the Romance of Italy. On the way back north I dropped in at Rome again. This time I was too diffident to impose on Sister Maria again, so I stayed at the youth hostel on Monte Sacro.

During this time a bunch of us at the hostel got into the habit of lunching together by the Trevi Fountain. We obtained bread and salami, then drew straws to see who would go over to the Vatican to fill a bottle with Holy Water. The stuff came out of a faucet in the side of the Vatican wall, so we felt it appropriate, in the City



Demonstrating merchandise at the Saturday flea market in Rome, 1961.

of Saint Peter, that we nourish ourselves with it. Whatever its spiritual properties, Vatican Holy Water was not bad tasting.

The Five Lands

Travel bums going eastward through Yugoslavia and Greece in 1961 kept telling me of a kind of magical place in Italy called the *Cinqueterre*—the five lands. The jumping-off point for this secret destination was the youth hostel in Lerici, on the coast south of Genoa. So when I scootered north from Pisa I made that a must-see detour.

The hostel was located on the flat roof of the Castello Lerici, a great granite citadel overlooking the port. There were indoor bunks, but during the summer most hostellers just laid their sleeping bags next to the cannon ports and slept under the stars.

The hostel warden was a feathery woman who called herself Madi and who claimed to have danced years ago for the Ballet Russe. It was said that on moonlit nights she sometimes donned yards of white chiffon and flitted among the battlements, like a ghost. One night while I

The Eurailpass

FROM 1959 ONWARD, buying a Eurailpass was the convenient way for parents to send their kids off for a summer in Europe, confident that they wouldn't get stuck without train fare. The original pass was good for up to 60 days of second-class travel on any train in the 13 countries of Western Europe.

The pass gave you only a seat; if you wanted a sleeping berth it cost another ten bucks or so. I met a kid from Iowa who had figured out how to avoid this extra bite. He had bought a nylon hammock and found two hooks to hang it from in the standard second-class carriage. At night he slung his hammock across the middle of the compartment, like a giant chrysalis, and drifted off to sleep in mid-air.

As a matter of fact, this Iowan Yankee had figured out how to tour Europe on less than a dollar a day. Instead of staying in hotel rooms, he went every evening to the nearest station and got on a train—going anywhere—that ran all night. This resulted in a kind of manic itinerary, caroming from one end of Europe to the other, but it was cost-effective. His only expense was food.

Finally, the kid from Iowa had discovered how to make his 30-day Eurailpass last forever. When you bought the pass it was blank; the first time you used it the conductor stamped the date, which started its clock running. But my friend, going for the Travel Bum Star of Frugality, had first covered the date box on the card with clear nail polish. Every time the card was about to expire he simply wiped off the date and stamped in a new one.

was there, she rounded up everybody for a trip to a restaurant in the port, where her buddy the chef had prepared a huge cauldron of *frutta di mare*. It was fishy-smelling and full of shells and pebbles, but it was a treat.

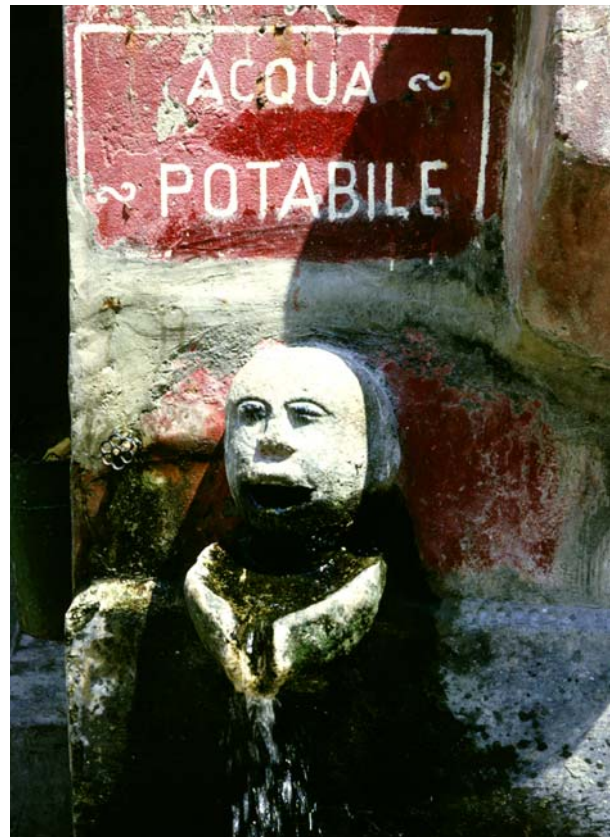
At the hostel I learned more about the Cinqueterre. You went to the rail station at La Spezia and boarded a local branch line. Winding

along the coast, through dozens of tunnels, the train stopped at five ancient fishing villages. In 1961 these places were not accessible by road; you reached them by boat, train, or (if you were really on the shorts) by hiking a footpath that hugged the cliffs for mile after mile.

I spent a couple of days exploring each of the five villages. They were like nineteenth-century Italy preserved under glass, including ornately baroque churches and hole-in-the-wall *trattorias* with pots of geraniums out front. Today, of course, a road has been built through the Cinqueterre; some of the villages have even sprouted high-rise hotels. Like most magical places, they were too good to last.

Fleas in Denmark

Travel bums that I met crossing Asia in 1960 were virtually unanimous: When you reached Europe, Copenhagen was the place to go. So as soon as my scooter was stowed safely in Paris (or so I thought), I took the train north.



A drinking fountain in one of the villages of the Cinqueterre.



Il Castello Lerici—by day a tourist attraction, by night a youth hostel. 1961.

They were right. On stepping off the train I encountered a public drinking fountain, the first I had seen in nine months. You could walk up to it, turn the handle, and get a stream of water that wouldn't make you sick. It is out of such little things that civilization is constructed.

The youth hostel, like everything else in Denmark, was clean and tidy. But the real glory of Copenhagen was Tivoli, an amusement park for grownups in the middle of the city. In May the festivities were in full swing—band concerts, puppet shows, fireworks, and a real flea circus.

I had heard of flea circuses but I had never actually seen one. We filed into a little tent, a dozen at a time, and gathered around the arena, which was a circle of paper about two feet across. Several magnifying glasses were available to help you see the show. The audience was enjoined not to sneeze, lest someone blow away the performance.

Using tweezers, the fleamaster took his little actors and actresses out of their matchboxes and placed them on the stage. Most were dressed in tiny costumes, and some had hooks tied to them so they could pull brightly-colored chariots or ride miniature tricycles. The performers went through their paces with gusto. Peering down

through the glass, one could almost visualize a traditional circus, reduced a thousand times.

Jazz By the Water. Besides dancing fleas, Copenhagen also hosted the most eclectic mix of jazz in Europe. The center was Nyhavn, a waterfront street dotted with bars and cafes, each with its own combo. Just strolling Nyhavn at night, catching the sounds pouring out of its doorways, was a rich musical experience.

1961 was mid-Elvis but pre-Beatles—for many, the golden age of rock. But it was also the era when the mainstream sound was evolving from cool jazz to hard bop. Along this one street you could hear it all, from Dixieland and Swing up to the cutting edge. The musical waters may have been choppy in the early '60s, but Nyhavn was the place to surf them.

Jazz in a Warehouse. The other center for jazz sounds in the early 1960s was West Berlin. Living on an island surrounded by unfriendly East Germans—an island that had been cut off once at the time of the Berlin Airlift—seemed to give West Berlin kids an anything-goes feel. I headed there by train from Copenhagen and immediately got sucked into the student scene.

The place to go was The Riverboat, a huge warehouse converted into a jazz palace. Various



Nyhavn in Copenhagen, a center for European jazz in 1961. On this street you could hear everything from Dixieland to bop.

combos performed on different floors, sometimes with two on a floor; the place was so huge that they didn't conflict. Beefy waitresses carried liter steins of beer to the trestle tables while the music poured out. I remember one Teutonic *chanteuse*, all two hundred pounds of her, belting out (in sort-of English) "Yass sah, dot's my baby!"

But the music in Berlin was not as experimental as the music in Copenhagen. It was good, but it was music to drink beer by, not music to get excited about.

Vienna

My "Grand Tour" of 1961 included a brief stop in Vienna, where I trudged through the usual palaces and ate *sacher torte mit schlag* in a dark, dusty coffee house left over from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This hit-and-run visit just left me hungry for a deeper look.

It took 23 years, but I made it back to Vienna in 1984, when I borrowed an apartment from my Mensa friend David Koblick, who lived in Steyr. The place was in the 13th *bezirk*, a working-class suburb twenty minutes by streetcar from the Ringstraße. I was traveling with JoAnn Malina and her mother; we stashed our stuff there while

we made a short driving trip to Budapest and back. But before we left Vienna we bought tickets for the Staatsoper, where Rudolf Nureyev was slated to dance the prince in *Swan Lake*.

The Flying Young Man. Nureyev was then 46 years old, long in the tooth for a dancer. I had watched him dance the same part 20 years earlier, in San Francisco, and was curious to see how he had handled the intervening years.

In the second act, the young prince leaps about the stage in a series of *jetées*, joyous at his new swan-love and unaware that Rothbart, the evil magician, is planning to switch birds on him. When Nureyev was in his prime, each leap had been a miracle—when he reached the top he somehow seemed to hang up there, in mid-air, before floating back down. I'm told he did it by unobtrusively folding up his legs. But now, 20 years later, the miracle was gone. Rudy soared as high as ever, but each time he came right back down again.

Dachau

Determined to see the warts of Europe as well as the good parts, I made a side trip to Dachau, a suburb of Munich, on May 25, 1961. At that early date the "monument" was barely organized for

The Icelandic Two-Step

tourism. Apart from a wreath propped up on the ovens, plus a few signs, the *Konzentrationslager* seemed pretty much as it had been when the panicky German guards fled 16 years earlier.

It felt weird to stand in the “shower room,” with its fake sprinkler heads and its massive steel doors, and realize how many innocent people had been murdered there. The cries of their suffering seemed to echo from the walls. I recalled reading that the mayor of the town, after being forced to tour the camp on liberation day, went home and killed himself. That seemed like an entirely appropriate response.

To round out the atmosphere of Dachau, in Munich I stayed at the cheapest hotel in town—the Hotel Bunker. It was conveniently downtown, directly beneath one of the main shopping streets, and it was, well, a bunker. The concrete walls were three feet thick, the doors were of steel, and there were no windows. It was the ideal place to try to imagine what life must have been like in a concentration camp.

The Icelandic Two-Step

In the 1960s and '70s, the cheapest way to fly to Europe was by way of Iceland. Why, you may ask? Because airline fares across the Atlantic were price-fixed by something called IATA, an industry association that fined the major carriers if they dared to sell cut-rate tickets.

But IATA did not have a hammerlock on Icelandic Airlines. Technically Icelandic did not cross the Atlantic—it flew from New York to Iceland and from Iceland to Luxembourg, two “local” hops. Thus they were free to sell tickets for whatever price they wanted. For the inconvenience of changing planes in Reykjavik, you could be transported to the heart of Europe for less than \$200.

I did the Icelandic two-step in '67 and again in '79. The first trip was a multi-level experience. I was out of a job, off to live in France, and on the short financially. To use my cheap Icelandic ticket I had to first get to New York. No problem;



The ovens at Dachau, Germany. 1961.



American culture reaches Belgium, 1961.

it was the Age of Hipness and the living was easy, so I placed an ad in the *Berkeley Barb*, a notorious “underground” newspaper.

The Drive-Away Game. The first response was from a guy who wanted me to cross the country with him and his wife, doing various strange things along the way. This sounded unpleasant. But then I was contacted by two Berkeley students who had signed up for a “drive-away” car. Bingo!

One lesson I learned from this trip was, Never entrust your car to a drive-away firm. Some naive airline pilot, needing to get his big Pontiac from Oakland to New York City, was paying \$150 to have it driven there. The kid who had signed up to drive it had given the agency \$150 up front against the prospect of collecting that sum from the pilot on the other end.

So the agency was paid off and happy and we never heard from them again. It was up to the three of us to get the car across the country at

least possible cost, which meant buying the cheapest gas we could find and putting in oil only when the engine started to rattle.

Along the way, we nourished ourselves at all-you-can-eat chicken places. One hard-bitten waitress somewhere in Indiana was inured to the likes of us—she insisted that we finish a full basket of dumplings before she brought us more chicken. We managed to stuff most of the dumplings under the seat cushions while her back was turned.

So we drove in shifts for 72 hours straight, staggering out of the car at 42nd and Broadway like a coven of zombies. I looked up a couple of Berkeley friends at their apartment in Greenwich Village and zonked out for 18 hours on their couch.

By choice, I was not present when the airline pilot was given back the remains of his car.

My Club

I say, old boy, it’s rather spiffy to stay at one’s club in London, what? In this case, we’re talking about the National Liberal Club, 2 Whitehall Place, across the street from the Admiralty.

My having guest privileges at such a fundamentally English institution stemmed from an offhand arrangement engineered by Victor Serebriakoff, the founder of Mensa. Nevertheless I exercised my rights vigorously, staying at the club in ’79, ’81, ’84, and ’85. I even had a favorite room, 403, which was equipped with a tiny marble balcony overlooking the Victoria Gardens.

You couldn’t beat the ambience. In the entry hall, next to the grand staircase, hung a huge oil portrait of the young Winston Churchill; he had been a member until he turned Tory in ’22. Upstairs was an oak-paneled reading room, with overstuffed chairs and porters in green livery serving tea. And in the dining room you could order a true English breakfast, kippers and all. It was a jolly good show.

In Zaire, during my 1984 Africa trek, I had spent some time drinking beer with a British pharmaceutical salesman, who gave me his card and suggested I look him up on my return. Six months later, in London, I rang him up. Our

Loving London

conversation dragged on in the desultory way of look-me-up-sometime chats. Then I suggested he come round to my club for a drink.

"Club?" he exclaimed. "I'll be right over!" It turned out that he had never been inside an English club, and it took an American travel bum to show him how the other half lived.

Loving London

My lifelong love affair with London actually began in September, 1950, when my mother took me there. We sailed from Boston on a Furness steamer and took the train down from Liverpool, an itinerary essentially unchanged from the nineteenth century.

The War had been over only a few years, and the shells of bombed-out buildings here and there memorialized the Blitz. "Austerity" was the order of the day; a hot topic of conversation was how much real meat should be allowed to infiltrate the tasteless oatmeal with which wartime "victory bangers" had been stuffed.

Yet the soul of London was not to be found in buildings or sausages; it glowed in the English culture, which I found immensely agreeable. I marveled at the riches of Foyle's book shop and camped out in the British Museum. I took up the study of heraldry.

Down and Out. Like many love affairs, this one turned out to be bumpy. A few weeks into my London bliss I suddenly found myself an unwilling participant in the great polio epidemic of 1950. I was bundled off to hospital and told I would probably never walk again. My main solace was a radio set with which I could tune in the BBC Third Programme, which featured such esoterica as performances of Sophocles in the original Greek.

Even at that early age I was a nascent travel bum. A life without walking seemed so patently unacceptable that I started busily exercising, struggling to get out of the fix I was in. My mother helped every way she could, including hiring a physiotherapist and carrying me to a psychic healer named Harry Edwards. By



Peace protesters in Trafalgar Square, London, 1968. Nelson's lion was not amused.



Ceremonial weighing of cheeses in Alkmaar, Netherlands. 1961. You have to respect a country that takes their cheese seriously.

Christmas day, 1950, she was able to stuff me into a wheel chair and fly me to Warm Springs.

London culture was all very fine, but the balmy air of Georgia was what I needed. I worked out several hours a day in the 88-degree pools, with the gratifying result that I was able to walk out of the Warm Springs Foundation in March. Travel bumming was possible again, and I never looked back.

The Moment of Truth

It was the height of the bullfight season when I swung my pack off the train at Seville in April, 1967. I hastened to buy a ticket to the *corrida*, where it turned out to be my lucky day. El Cordobes was on the bill. Although criticized by some purists as too theatrical, he was the star performer of his time. When he retired four years later he was the most highly-paid matador in Spain.

It was a hot day and the arena was dusty. The crowd was smartly dressed—the men mostly in suits but some in nineteenth-century costumes, looking very macho. There were raucous shouts from the stands as the *picadors* poked the bull, who responded by pursuing each of them with

gusto. Then a roar from the crowd announced El Cordobes, who strutted out dressed in his “suit of lights.” The animal snorted and pawed, seemingly puzzled by this fancy-dude apparition.

El Cordobes weaved in and around the bull. After each little minuet with the cape he sauntered away insolently while the beast swung his head from side to side, trying to figure it all out. Then the orchestra struck up a haunting little swing-tune and the crowd grew silent. It was the “moment of truth,” as man and bull closed in on each other. Death was in the air. In an instant, El Cordobes leaped and thrust his sword over the bull’s neck. The animal dropped like he’d been hit by lightning and the audience went wild.

So that was my Hemingway moment. It felt hot and strong and good. El Cordobes was awarded both ears for his performance. Do you suppose he actually accepted those *disjecta membra*, and if so what did he do with them?

I followed the crowd out of the ring and into a nearby *meson*, there to fill up on tapas and sangria. Some American good ‘ol boys were reviewing the finer points of the afternoon’s sport, their conversation peppered with terms like *estoque* and *muleta*. For them, slaughtering a bull to music was the Eighth Lively Art. For the

The Dead Hang Around

Spanish, I think, it was mostly an opportunity to go out in public and enjoy a bit of excitement together.

The Dead Hang Around

In 1984, Christine and I exited Africa by taking a boat from Tunis to Palermo, on the north coast of Sicily. It was the usual Third-World-to-Europe transition, even though Sicily ranked as one of Europe's poorer destinations; we rioted on lasagne and *cassata* and red wine, enjoying all the civilized goodies that had been in short supply for so long. We even took in *La Bohème* at the Palermo Opera.

But creature comforts aside, travel bums we had met going north had advised us not to miss one of the lesser-known curiosities of Palermo, the *Catacombe dei Cappuccini*. This place was unlocked only briefly on certain Wednesdays, but we lucked out and found the door open.

It seems that during the mid-1800s an alternative to burial was fashionable in Palermo. You had your body artfully preserved, dressed in your best clothes, and hung on the wall in the

catacombs under the Capuchin Convent. Some 8,000 bodies were there, staring at you from the sides of great echoing chambers. Entire families could be found hanging in a row—mama, papa, and the kids. Since we were the only visitors in the cavernous, dimly-lit rooms, the effect was superspooky.

I went back to Palermo in 2003. Word of the catacombs had gotten around and they were now a recognized stop on the bus tours. You just can't keep a good thing quiet.

House Partying

Travel bumming is an experience you naturally want to share. On the Asian trains and in the cheap hotels, backpackers often formed couples and triples for companionship and logistical support.

My 1977 trek to India and back, accompanied by three women, had opened my eyes to the possibilities of group travel. So the next year, while sitting around a friend's pool with a bunch of other Mensans, I casually inquired if anyone would like to share the rental of a farm-



A few bodies on display in the Capuchin catacombs. Palermo, Sicily, 1984.



The princess and the Frog get it on. Innsbruck, 1968.

house in the south of France. The response was immediate and enthusiastic.

Back to the Land. The converted *mas*, or Provençal farmhouse, was a common institution in southern France. You hosed out an old stone barn, installed modern plumbing, and sold it to British expats as a retirement home. The rental business was brisk, particularly during the summer months when the Brits preferred to go somewhere else.

After some searching I found a commodious ex-farm with eight bedrooms in two buildings. It was located just outside Seillans, a medieval “perched” village near Fayence. I rented it for August and September, 1979, and proceeded to sell one-month bedroom sublets to my friends.

The two-month party was memorable. We divvied up the housekeeping jobs so that each couple was responsible for feeding everybody every eight days. The first communards up in the morning made a “bread run” into the village, bringing back fresh croissants for breakfast. I bought two cheap used cars, which we shared out. In the evenings we sat around a

huge stone table under the grape arbor, drinking the local wine and sharing the day’s adventures.

Going International. Seillans worked so well that three years later I organized a similar party at a large chalet in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The locale was Mayens-de-Sion, a tiny *hameau* overlooking the “Quatre Vallées.” We spent a happy month hiking the mountain *pistes* and eating *raclette* in the local inns.

Finally, in 1984, I went all out and rented an entire hotel. It was located in Millstatt, Austria, on the shores of a mountain lake. The contract, which Mensan friend David Koblick helped negotiate, was written in tongue-twisting German but I signed it anyway. For two weeks in June, we had the run of the place and cooked our meals in the hotel kitchen. The owner even threw in an account at the local wholesale grocery. It was travel bumming on a grand scale.

It was in the Millstättersee that I fulfilled a lifelong dream of falling by parachute. Polio had left me unable to contemplate the usual ground landing, but there in Austria a local entrepreneur offered for a few bucks to drop you into the lake. Watching the water rushing up at me and then thrashing my way out from under the nylon was a unique experience.

Sic Transit Gloria Scooter

Scootering from Trieste down to Naples in 1961, then up to Paris, had been a splendid way to see Italy and France up close. But those 1,500 miles had taken their toll on my trusty Vespa; I hesitated to add another 1,500 by scootering to Vienna and back. So I parked the machine in the back of the Paris youth hostel and bought a second-class train ticket.

On returning to Paris, I found that my poor old scooter, entrusted to the hostel warden, had been stripped bare—even the seat was gone. It still ran, but there was no prospect of driving it to London.

So the next morning I went into the breakfast room at the hostel, waving the title booklet and declaring, “Free motor scooter to the first person who wants it.” Some British chaps started expostulating, “I say, you can’t mean that,” etc. The French kids chattered to each other in

Freighting the Atlantic

French. One German said, “Ja, I’ll take it!” The last I saw of him, he had tied a pillow where the seat used to be and was heading eastward, home to Frankfurt.

Freighting the Atlantic

A persistent icon of travel bumming used to be “taking a freighter,” with its promise of slow, rough-hewn voyages to backwater ports. Many tankers and cargo ships were designed with motel-like cabins for 12 passengers (beside the crew), this being the maximum number they could carry without a doctor on board. Sometimes these cabins were occupied by employees of the shipping line, but there were always a few that went unused. Most major ports had shipping offices that could put the casual traveler into an empty space on a ship due to sail in a week or two.

This was how I returned from Europe to the US in June, 1961. I found an agent in London who got me on a ship leaving Antwerp eight days later. For \$165 he even threw in a train ticket across the Channel. The ship was a grain carrier, sailing in ballast, its destination described only as “east coast USA.” We plowed across the Atlantic for twelve days while the owners telexed here and there, searching for a cargo.

On the tenth day the captain was told to dock at Hampton Roads, Virginia, which is what we did.

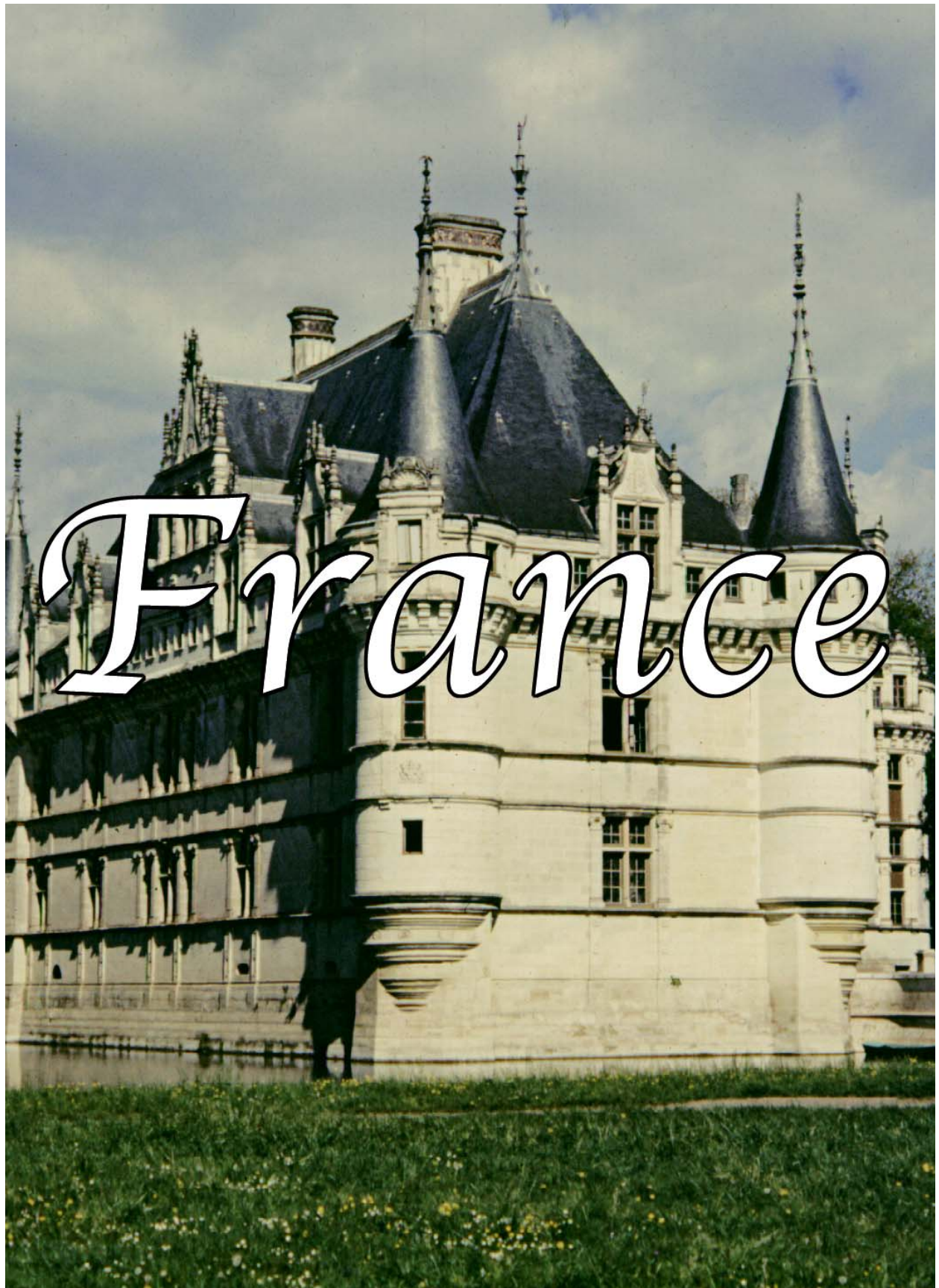
The only other passengers were a retired couple from Ohio. I occupied the “owner’s cabin,” a neat single-berth snugger with a tiny bathroom. We ate with the captain, who was Chinese, and the officers, who came from everywhere. Giving a nod to cruiser luxury, the engineer had rigged a Doughboy-style pool on the afterdeck. Otherwise we lay in the sun, watched the sea go by, and didn’t bother the crew. I read Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* and a couple of novels. It was as close to complete relaxation as I’ve ever managed.

🚲 *Stepping ashore in Hampton Roads—eleven months and two thousand dollars after sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge—concluded my first Big Trip. After crossing Asia and Europe mostly by land I fancied myself a seasoned travel bum. The subsequent trip by Greyhound to the Bay Area almost seemed boring—I mean, there weren’t even any chickens underfoot. I slept most of the way.*

I came home, started an electronics company, and bought a boat. Life was a rat race. Then in 1967 my stock was raided and I found myself suddenly unemployed. I went off to Southern France, to live the good life and lick my wounds.



Stonehenge, on the Salisbury Plain in southwestern England. 1961.



Travel Bumming: France



Paris was somehow never the same after the public pissoirs were removed. I took this picture in 1961 when they were still much used.
Overleaf: Azay-le-Rideau, a jewel-box of a chateau south of Paris. 1961.

My “Year in Provence”



Châteauneuf-de-Grasse, the village where I lived and wrote for ten months in 1967-68.

SCOOTERING THROUGH ITALY AND FRANCE in 1961 was a multilevel revelation for me. It was *Travel Bum Meets Grand Tour*. I decided that after I had seen all the museums in Italy I would be ready to die and be buried next to a French restaurant.



Your friendly gargoyle guards Paris from the roof of Notre Dame, 1961. Since then the Paris skyline has changed—not, IMHO, for the better.

But except for business trips, I remained deeply rooted in the Bay Area until 1967. That year, however, was a watershed in my life. Five years of running Berkeley Instruments, a struggling electronics company, had left me exhausted. When a group of speculators took control of the stock I didn't have the energy to fight. I resigned and let them merge the company into a conglomerate headquartered in Colorado.

Or maybe the travel bumming itch flared up again. It had lain dormant for nearly six years, while I wore a suit every day and ran a business. Now it was on a roll. I sold my car, crated my books, and headed for Southern France.

My “Year in Provence”

I stepped off the train in Cannes on May 1, 1967, while the Film Festival was in full swing. It was the year that Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* won the *Palme d'Or*, perhaps on the strength of its nude scenes. Friends had given me the name of a British

Travel Bumming: France



The Plage de Pampelonne near St. Tropez. In 1967 toplessness had not quite got started, although the man in the center seems about to inaugurate bottomlessness.

journalist in Cannes who might have helped me find a place to live, but he was unreachable, swept away by the hoopla.

On Wheels Again. After a day prowling *la Croisette* in a fruitless search for starlets taking off their tops, I decided to get organized. A tiny *garagiste's* shop had a Volkswagen à vendre, and after a bit of palaver (mostly in sign language) he agreed to sell it for \$400. It turned out that *Boche* cars were a drag on the market in France, and he was happy to shuffle his dubious burden off on an American.

Wheels now under me, I made a systematic tour of the local real estate agents, following an ever-widening circle from Cannes, which had the best beach. My search eventually led me to a comfy flat on the third floor of a 16th-century stone building in the village of Châteauneuf-de-Grasse, 12 miles inland from the coast.

Madame Mougin had fixed the place up for her daughter, who didn't want it, so I rented it for 300 francs a month, about \$63. It had a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room, and even a tiny fireplace.

Rusticating and Writing. Thus began my "year in Provence," which actually amounted to eight months in the *Alpes-Maritimes*. I roamed the country lanes, glorying in the fields of mimosa and lavender. I dined like a gourmet for

three dollars at out-of-the-way inns. My sister Shirley came to visit in September, and we picnicked under an olive tree on crusty bread, goose *paté*, and 20¢-a-liter white wine. It was like a paradise of extended travel bumming.

Yet my year was not entirely idleness and good eating. I spent several hours a day writing a book, *The Architecture of Knowledge*, which was eventually published in 1980. The fact that nobody is known to have actually read the book did not detract from my pleasure in writing it.

La Belle France Revealed

In the summer of 1967, while living in Châteauneuf-de-Grasse, I spent a day on the famed Île du Levant. It took an hour's drive to get to the Mediterranean port of Le Lavandou, followed by 35 minutes on the ferry boat to Heliopolis. The far end of the island was occupied by a French naval base, the Heliopolis end by a nudist colony. I was told that the French had built a sturdy fence between the two.

During the ferry ride all the passengers disrobed, slowly and deliberately, until by the time we landed everybody was quite nude. It was like a slow-motion striptease. Then as the jetty came into view, I was gratified to see it covered with a gaggle of nicely-tanned teenage girls, evidently waiting to see what the day's

boat would bring. *So this is the real France*, I thought. Although it was not yet noon, a feeling like a sunburn suffused my face.

Naked City. There was a small beach east of the landing and a fully-featured village at the top of the hill, populated by people in various states of undress. I had been to restaurants with topless waitresses in San Francisco, but I had never seen a restaurant where the customers were topless as well.

One man was strolling around wearing nothing but a little boxy cap on his head. I assumed that he was a gendarme, but how could you tell?

For those who were too diffident to be seen completely naked, a souvenir stand sold "*le minimum*"—a triangle of red cloth, about the size of a tortilla chip, with strings to hold it in place. I bought one and mailed it home for the price of a single postage stamp. It was the first piece of clothing I bought in France.

The Île du Levant had been established since 1931, unlike the ephemeral bursts of public nudity that swept America during the hippie years. Some people built homes on the island, presumably casting their clothes away forever. As with many things French, our passing fad is their tradition.

Speaking French

Speaking French has been a life-long struggle for me. I took two semesters in high school but retained only the rudiments. Before going to live in France in 1967, I had boned up with a phrase book and absorbed enough words to find and rent a flat. But my pronunciation was still at the stage where French people would back away in alarm when I tried to address them.

A few days after setting up my little flat in Châteauneuf-de-Grasse, I needed to repair a flaky light switch. For this I required a screwdriver. So I hit the books and rehearsed my lines. *J'ai besoin d'un tournevis, Monsieur*. Gathering my courage together, I sidled diffidently into the village *quincaillerie* and recited my bit.

Instead of backing away in alarm, the hardware store clerk promptly opened a drawer full of screwdrivers and began to extol the merits of each one. I selected one and asked the price. The answer made sense. I tendered exact change. Mission accomplished and screwdriver in hand, I walked out of that little shop ten feet (three meters) off the ground. After that day I babbled French at will, never doubting that the rest of the world would understand me. And much of the time it did.



The famous bookstalls by the Seine. They were a great place to pick up prints and pages taken out of old books. 1961.

Travel Bumming: France



More statuary on the roof of Notre Dame. 1961.

The ultimate test occurred in 1984, when I proposed marriage in French over the transatlantic telephone. Believe it or not, my trusty phrase book covered that one, too. "I would like to marry myself with you." Dany said "*oui*," and the rest is history.

Ah, Paris!

The "first time I saw Paris" occurred at the end of April, 1961, as I putted through the Porte d'Italie on my motor scooter. Going for the full Bohemian experience, I took an attic room at the *Hotel des Quatre Nations* in the rue Mazarine. I drank a Dubonnet at *le Procope*, Voltaire's favorite café, perhaps hoping that some of his intellectual *puissance* was still hanging around.

Days I prowled the left bank, picking conversations with Americans who were also trying to plug into the fabled Paris of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. It was a great way to meet girls, all of whom seemed to come from Berkeley. In the evenings I nodded to the cool jazz at *Au Chat qui Pêche*, in the rue de la Huchette, and tapped my feet to the flamenco at *La Guitare*. I even bought a beret.

A Night at the Opera. But analyzing Sartre and chewing over the meaning of meaning, even in romantic little *zincs*, soon palled. To elevate my esthetics, I bought a ticket to the Opera.

Granted it wasn't much of a ticket; it was for the *poulailler*, the "chicken roost," high among the ceiling beams and plaster ornaments of the eleventh tier. The stage was a bright little dot, like a football field seen from an airplane. The performance that night was *Samson et Delilah*, and *le tout Paris* was there in their best clothes.

The opera ended as Samson, singing his heart out, thrust away the pillars of the temple and brought the whole set down on his head. The effect from where I sat was spectacular, but there was one small problem. A stagehand up in the flies had presumably been detailed to add verisimilitude by sprinkling plaster dust down on the scene. Instead, he dumped an entire bagful at once. Twenty pounds of plaster hit the stage with a whump!, sending an opaque white cloud rolling slowly out over the audience. As the *crème* of Paris society exited the Opera, the gentlemen in their soup-and-fish were covered with plaster dust, looking for all the world like fugitives from a minstrel show.

Eating Well

One of my first projects in Paris in 1961 was to eat at a Michelin-rated restaurant—but of course I couldn't afford it. What to do? After inspecting the menu posted outside Fouquet's, on the Champs Elysées, I formed a plan and went inside, disguised in my white shirt and tie.

From the hors-d'oeuvres side of the menu I ordered a dozen escargots and a green salad. The snails were the size of walnuts and the service included half a baguette of bread. I ate it all—the snails, the salad, and all the bread, using the last crusts of it to sop up all the butter sauce and all the salad dressing.

At this point the waiter, thinking he had captured a real trencherman at his table, starting lining up fish and meat courses for the main event. But I merely asked for the check, having eaten my fill of some of the best cuisine in Paris. The waiter was devastated, but my expense

Paris: 10, 9, 8...

book records that this adventure in *haute cuisine* cost me only about \$4.

Chez Escoffier. Six years later, during my “year in Provence,” I made a pilgrimage to the *Musée de l’Art Culinaire* in Villeneuve-Loubet, on the slopes above the *Baie des Anges*. It had been created out of Escoffier’s house, and his kitchen had been lovingly preserved. There, amid the *bain-maries* and stone *quenelle* pots, lay albums of menus that the great chef had cooked up for various kings and queens.

It was a slow day—I was the only pilgrim at the shrine—so the curator himself led me about. He delighted in pointing out the menus that Escoffier had prepared for Edward VII when Eddie was Prince of Wales: they each included an oyster dish. It had something to do with the Prince’s sporting capacities.

The Top of the Tree. Finally, to round out my culinary education, in 1997 Dany and I took her mother to what is arguably the best restaurant in the world—Paul Bocuse’s eatery in Collonges-sur-Saône, on the outskirts of Lyon. Dany made the reservation, since American accents sometimes evoke short shrift at the temples of French cuisine.

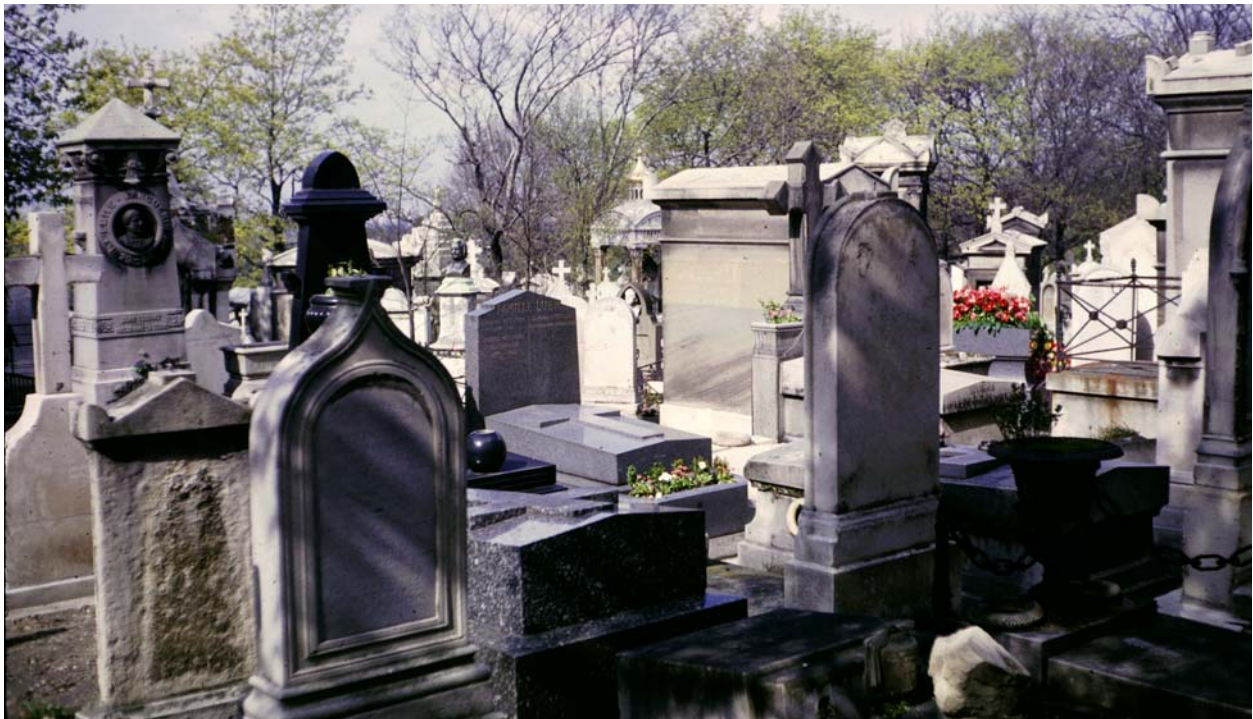
Shortly after we sat down, the master himself made a tour of the dining room, unshaven and clad in a dirty apron. At first I thought he was the clean-up man, but it turned out that at the age of 70, revered among chefs as a demi-god, Paul Bocuse had transcended pretence.

We lit into lunch, and I ordered Bocuse’s signature *soupe aux truffes noires*, a dish he had created for a state banquet at the Elysée Palace in 1975. When the waiter poked through the crust and let the aroma of truffles and herbs escape, I knew why I had spent four hours battling the *autoroute* to get there.

Later, when I told my colleagues at Apple Computer that I had paid \$50 for a bowl of soup and it was worth every penny, they just shook their heads. They claimed that it was not a valid travel bum experience. But it was an experience as native to France as my eating termites thirteen years earlier had been native to Nigeria. Travel bumming is never just about money.

Paris: 10, 9, 8...

Since 1961, I have been back to Paris at least a dozen times and have watched it change from



Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Jim Morrison was buried here until recently, when his remains were kicked out. Too much partying by his fans at his gravesite. I'm sure his ghost is gratified to have been evicted for rowdyism thirty years after Jim's death.



Rocamadur, a fortified town in the Dordogne. 1981.

very French to sort of an amalgam of French, Eurotrash and North African. Call me a foggy, but I liked it better the way it was. Nevertheless, you can still find the old spell if you look hard enough.

The Champs Elysées is as grand as ever, and even has a useful addition—McDonald's. Where else can you sit in a sidewalk cafe on one of the world's premier avenues and buy lunch for less than five dollars?

Notre Dame still weaves its medieval charm. And even Montmartre, although now largely an Arab barrio, manages on Sundays to recreate some of the *La Bohème* atmosphere that tourists look for. But this show is pretty much a fly in amber—the real artists have fled Montmartre for more congenial neighborhoods.

If you want to find the "true" Paris, go to one of the less chic arrondissements—the 11^{eme}, for example—and find a bistro where they still scrawl the daily menu with chalk on a blackboard. Then eat your heart out.

Mysterious Art

The Lascaux cave, with its evocative ochre wall paintings, was still open to the public when I scootered there in 1961. Two years later the damage being done by tourist traffic forced its

closure. The date was mid-April and the group waiting at the entrance numbered about a dozen, including a venerable scholar from Cambridge. On learning that I was American, he unwound a rambling tale about an alleged cousin of his who lived in Nebraska. Having had no experience with the dry wit of the British don, I took him seriously.

"The poor chap was accosted by a band of red Indians and had to frighten them off," he chattered on heartily, "by firing one of your American fowling-pieces into the air. What you call a machine-gun, I believe." And so on, each anecdote more precious than the last. Later, one of his party pulled me aside and remarked, "He does that to every Yank."

Dotty dons aside, Lascaux conveyed an ineffable mystery. In its musty darkness you could feel the early men, whose lives depended on the hunt, covering the walls with symbols of their urgent desires. It was painting as magic and magic as art.

To compensate for closing the original cave, the French built a modern duplicate, called Lascaux II, that tried to reproduce its milieu. It is nicely done; but while the art may be there, the mystery is not.

A Country Hotel

My favorite hotel in southern France had only six rooms, and the communal toilet was built into a disused staircase. You opened the door to the stairs, walked up three steps, and sat down. But each room contained a tiny kitchen, with a closet full of pots and table service for four.

It was a good place to hang out. Room 5, my favorite, had been converted from the old *grenier*, or storage attic. It opened onto a private rooftop terrace where you could write, eat, sunbathe, or gaze out over the tidy Provençal countryside.

The hotel was called La Sousto; it was located in Fayence, about 30 miles inland from San

Liberation Day

Raphaël. In the 60's and 70's Fayence was a medium-sized village: for instance, it had a bank but no cinema. Nevertheless, it housed eight restaurants, one of which boasted a Michelin rosette. The village perched on a hillside overlooking a lush valley filled with small farms and vineyards. Seen from below, its red-tiled roofs formed a splashy patchwork against the green background of cypresses and olive trees.

Liberation Day

Like every respectable French village, Fayence in 1984 contained a monument to its war dead—*les enfants de Fayence, mort pour la Patrie*. The original structure had been built in 1919; it was a short granite column, on top of which a stone soldier in an overcoat and pot-helmet surveyed the central square.

The side plaques listed 46 names from World War I. After World War II the monument was still in good shape, so the thrifty French had found room on it for new names. In other villages you could sometimes see yet more names added, for Indochina, Algeria, Chad, and Lebanon. The French had gotten quite weary of

adding names, and besides they were running out of room on their monuments.

May 8th is Liberation Day in France; on that date in 1945 the country was officially freed from Nazi rule. De Gaulle, Churchill, and Eisenhower rode down the Champs Elysées while bands played the Marseillaise and old patriots crowded the streets to cheer and weep.

Remembering. I was staying in Fayence on Liberation Day in 1984. There and in every other French city and village a similar ritual took place. It constituted a memorial for the dead plus an opportunity to remind the current generation what happened, who did it, and why. We Americans, who have never seen jack-booted invaders marching through our streets, must exercise our empathy to appreciate the intensity with which those events were recalled.

In mid-morning, people began to gather in the square. Many men wore decorations—medals and combat ribbons pinned to their business suits. Here and there you could see the modest red riband of the Legion of Honor. A local brass band assembled, their instruments shimmering in the sun. Two gendarmes in neat blue uniforms halted traffic through the square.



Laying a wreath in a French village on Armistice Day, 1967.

Travel Bumming: France



My sister, Shirley, pours the wine for a little *pique-nique* in the Provençal countryside. 1967.

Someone opened the gate in the metal railing that enclosed the monument.

At exactly 11:30, the band struck up a march. A delegation of village officials—the *depot des gerbes*—unfurled flags for the veterans' organization and the city council. They marched an enormous floral wreath up to the base of the monument. They stepped back and faced the crowd. The band paused and then launched into the *Marseillaise*. Of all national anthems, ours included, this is certainly the most stirring. It speaks equally of valor and democracy: "*Aux armes, citoyens!*" The band played with gusto. The two gendarmes saluted; everybody else stood at attention. Afterwards the crowd applauded.

Reminding. The head of the local veterans' organization stood in front of the monument and motioned everyone closer. The people gathered in a semicircle around him. He reminded them of how the Second World War had touched everybody—not just the soldiers in uniform, but also the Resistance fighters, the people deported to extermination camps, the villagers bombed in their homes. They died, he said, so France itself would survive. It had survived, and would continue to do so. He closed with the formula "*Vive la France!*" The way he said it was not rabble-rousing, but rather firm and determined. France would live.

The mayor finished with a short address. He emphasized the solemnity of the occasion and its historical background. "Never forget" was

his message. His speech ended with the welcome information that the *Salle des Fetes* was now open.

Celebrating. A Frenchman's mind never strays far from his stomach. It was typical that this day of remembrance was accompanied by a good drink. The characteristic ceremony was called an *aperitif d'honneur*—a toast, as it were, to the dead. In the *Salle des Fetes*, one street below the square, tables had been laid out with glasses and bottles.

There was *pastis*, the anise-flavored liqueur so beloved of the French; vermouth, both red and white; muscadet wine; and fruit juices for those who were watching their livers. Dishes of local olives and fresh-baked little breadsticks provided munchies. The crowd trooped in and set to.

Meanwhile, the band had established itself at the end of the *salle*. They played a series of tunes, mostly French, that recalled the war years. Among them was "Three Cheers for the Red, White, and Blue." I guess it applied to the Tricolor as well as to the Stars and Stripes. As the aperitifs did their job, there was a lot of back-slapping and kissing on cheeks. Several couples got up and danced.

Finally the aperitifs ran out and it came to that most sacred period of the day, lunchtime. The villagers drifted away. In July they would celebrate Bastille Day, the birth of republican France, and in November they would salute the *morts* from World War I.

Christmas With a Countess

Is it too much to remember your country three times each year? Not for the French. They have worked hard and sacrificed much for what they possess. Keeping it must require a lot of remembering.

Christmas With a Countess

Christmas in France in 1967 felt more spiritual, and less commercial, than Christmases I had experienced in America. There were toys in the shops, to be sure, but the children's expectations didn't explode into a giftgasm on Christmas morning. Everything seemed to build up to High Mass on Christmas Eve and then conclude with a feast the next day.

Through a friend I had come to know a "lady of a certain age," la Comtesse du Guerny, whose English-speaking acquaintances called her "Fox." She had an estate in the Vaucluse, near Vaison-la-Romaine, where, among other activities, she harbored a number of American hippies who were disinclined to be drafted into the Vietnam War.

Noël Français. I didn't meet any of the countess's hippie fugitives—they seemed to be at work in farflung parts of her estate—but when she heard that I had served honorably in the Army and was writing a book of philosophy, she welcomed me into her circle. She invited me to stay for Christmas week, during which I reciprocated by installing an electric light on the back terrace of her place. The main house, a great stone pile surrounded by fruit trees, was filled with books and was most agreeable.

The guest list for Christmas dinner, I was told, was "typical Fox." It included her lifelong companion (who could have passed for Alice B. Toklas), a Texas oilman, an emaciated French anthropologist who had just emerged from six years studying an obscure tribe in the lower Congo, and my friend who had introduced us, a retired

engineer who had built the instrument panel for the *Spirit of St. Louis*.

We dined in baronial splendor on roast goose and mead, a beverage brewed locally from honey gathered in the Haute-Provence. The table conversation started in on Pushkin and evolved by unpredictable degrees to the subject of truffles. It turned out that the countess, who had hitherto been "land poor," had suddenly hit the jackpot by discovering these precious fungi under a grove of oak trees on her estate.

Black Gold. French jurisprudence apparently embraces a whole section of law covering the ownership of truffles. The countess's oak grove had become a *truffière* that was "*protégé par loi*." She was authorized to hire armed guards, and poachers could be shot on sight.

I had always visualized truffles being snuffed out by fat, grunting pigs, but I learned that modern technology favored dogs. The countess described how one was trained.

"You enter him into the *truffière* and you let him dig up and eat a truffle," she explained. "And that," she added with Gallic firmness, "is the last truffle he will ever eat. But he will always remember how good it was."



Louis XII, who was born in the chateau of Blois, stands guard over its doorway.

French Real Estate

PONDERING THE ACQUISITION of a *gite* in France led me to learn a bit about French real estate transactions. In our English tradition, you buy just the land; “improvements thereon” are sort of thrown in. In France, the improvements can be owned separately. There were even tales of houses being transferred in pieces on the owner’s death—one son getting the walls and another the roof, etc. Woe to the unwary buyer who failed to gather up all the parts of a house! He might find that his new chimney belonged to someone else.

At the time of actual purchase, I was told, the *notaire* came into play. Because a substantial transfer tax was levied, the main role of the *notaire* seemed to be to come up with a fictitious sale price that the authorities would believe. Seller and buyer gathered in the *notaire*’s office, signed the papers, and the buyer handed over a check for the “tax price.” The *notaire* then begged a call of nature and left the room, taking the papers with him.

At this point the buyer would haul out a wad of banknotes and pay the seller the rest of the real price. When the *notaire* returned, he would ask if everyone was “satisfied” with the transaction. Upon the seller’s assurance that all was okey-dokey, the *notaire* would file the papers. In such ways have the French dealt with tax collectors since the days of Julius Caesar, apparently with much success.

facade of a house outward and a warren of windowless rooms inward. Narrow lanes and footpaths laced the cliff face to provide access. The French called it *la vie troglodyte*.

A Travel Bum’s Temptation. At one point I seriously considered buying a cave in Cotignac. There was an uninhabited one, owned by a lady in Lyon, that I was told could be had for \$18,000. It featured two bedrooms and a little terrace, facing south, plus a cozy living room that ran back into the rock.

The *cadastre*, which mapped all the properties in the village, showed only the external house. An ancient rule in Cotignac allowed homeowners to burrow as far back into the *falaise* as they cared to, limited only by their energy with hammer and chisel. Need a new closet? Pound away! If you were lucky you might break into a natural chamber and find yourself the owner of a vast, echoing gallery.

In the end, I gave up the idea of owning a *gite troglodyte* in the south of France. It was not a true travel bum thing. But a few years ago, while my kids were watching *The Flintstones*, for a minute the dream came flashing back.

🚲 *The travel bug, once established, never dies.*

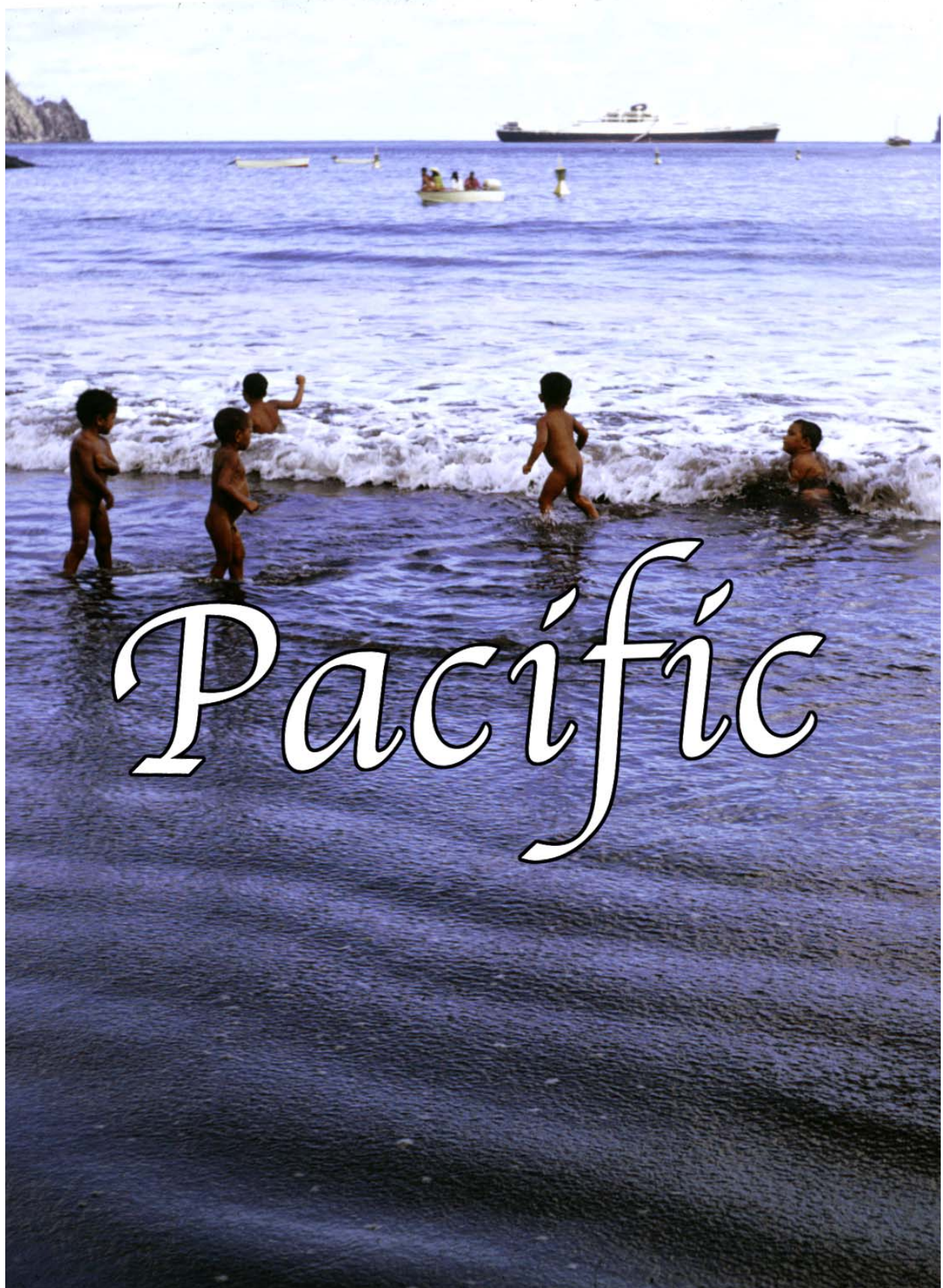
After eight months in France I began to feel restless and decided to go back to the US by traveling eastward, trekking again across Asia.

So on January 12, 1968, I said goodbye to Chateauneuf. My Volkswagen, which had carried me dependably all over Europe, I sold to another American for my original \$400. To cross the Pacific, I bought a passage leaving Sydney three months later on Messageries Maritimes, the French colonial line. The sea voyage promised to give me a leisurely view of Polynesia before depositing me in Panama.

A Gite in a Cliff

British retirees in the south of France maintained a kind of loose network of friends-of-friends. It was through this community that I met an English couple who lived on the side of a cliff.

The village of Cotignac, in the department of the Var, lay at the base of a *falaise* made of the relatively soft volcanic rock called tuff. Since Roman times it had been local practice to carve out dwellings in the *falaise*, usually building the



Travel Bumming: The Pacific



The author and friend at a ruined temple on the island of Bali, June 1968.

Overleaf: Boys play in the surf on the island of Nuku Hiva as the ship *Caledonien* lies offshore. 1968.

Bussing Java



A couple of cool dudes show off their snakes in a village in southern Java, Indonesia. 1968.

THE ROUTE TO THE PACIFIC that I took in 1968, ending at the Sydney dock where lay the ship I had booked, ran through Indonesia and Australia. From Singapore I flew to Djakarta, then took a series of buses and boats to the island of Bali, at the eastern end of Indonesia. Along the way I flew over equator and plunged into the tropical lands of the South Pacific.

Bussing Java

One of my prime objectives in Indonesia was to see the Buddhist temple complex of Borobudur. My professor of Asian art at Berkeley had marveled about the place at great length, while also mentioning how nearly inaccessible it was.

The Borobudur was one huge temple on seven levels, with some 1,400 reliefs carved in it and countless statues of the Buddha. I spent most of a day climbing in, on, over, and around it. It was indeed worth two days on rattletrap buses to get there.

Nearby lay the Hindu temple complex of Prambanan, larger than Borobudur but less well preserved. There were a dozen or so tall, crum-

bling structures, intricately carved. It's odd—and somewhat characteristic of the eclectic life of Indonesia—that major monuments of two



Monkeys obviously up to no good on a relief at Prambanan.

Travel Bumming: The Pacific



A Balinese opera. The guy with all the hair appears to be trying to pitch a proposition, but the monkeys aren't buying it.

different religions had been built next to each other at roughly the same time.

The south coast of Java was beautiful—as fine a string of sleepy villages and palm-lined beaches as you could find anywhere. The

corruption of Indonesian officialdom had scared away any kind of tourist development, so everything was pretty much the same as it had been for the last hundred years. A small benefit, I guess, of having a wretched government.



A market on the island of Bali. In 1968 older women still did their shopping topless.

A Pristine Retreat

Bali in 1968 was just on the brink of becoming “spoiled.” The high-rise Bali Beach hotel had been constructed, but it was still something of a local curiosity; the planeloads of hard-drinking Australian tour groups were still several years in the future. Denpasar, the main town, was hardly more than a sleepy village; a few miles away, in Ubud, expatriate artists could live as if Bali had floated onto another planet.

I rented a motor scooter to visit the outlying villages, where local ladies still shopped bare-breasted in the marketplace. My goal was to see the alleged “sacred volcano,” which turned out to look much like any other volcano. Maybe it was more interesting when it was angry.

The lodging of choice in Denpasar was the Adi Yasa *losman*, a clean native hostel. Adi Yasa spoke English and doubled as a travel advisor for backpackers passing through. He maintained a guest book where travelers wrote about the

tortuous route by which you could get from Bali to Australia on the cheap.

Bumming to Australia. The travel-bum route south from Bali started with begging a ride on the biweekly missionary boat to Kupang, on the island of Timor. There you looked up a man named Eli. Adi Yasa’s book was filled with comments about Eli, ranging from “He took my money and screwed me” to “Eli was wonderful, I couldn’t have made the trip without him.”

If all went well, Eli wangled you a Jeep ride to a village somewhere deep in the Timor jungle, from which you hiked a mountain trail down to the coastal town of Dili. From Dili you could usually wangle your way on a military plane to Darwin, on the north coast of Australia.

All this sounded romantic, but I had a date with a ship in Sydney and couldn’t risk ending up flattened with jungle fever in some unknown village. So I bussed myself back the length of Java and flew from Jakarta to Darwin.



Me again, this time showing off a “magnetic anthill” in the outback. These anthills actually point north.



The juggernaut truck train on which I hitched a ride out of Darwin, on the northern coast of Australia. 1968.

Across the Outback

During World War II, Australia acquired a couple of sturdy highways across the center of the continent: the Stuart highway, running from Darwin in the north to Adelaide in the south, and the Barkly highway, running from Alice Springs in the middle of nowhere eastward to Townsville on the coast. Where the two highways crossed was called Three Ways, which in 1968 boasted a pub, a petrol station, and a set of spartan sleeping accommodations.

Thumbing Southward. On the southern outskirts of Darwin, where the town met the desert, I soon hitched a ride on a tanker train—a string of semi-trailers hooked together in a way that was legal only in the sparsely inhabited regions of the Northern Territory. This juggernaut took several minutes and dozens of gear changes to get up to speed, after which there was no stopping it. We barreled our way down the road to Three Ways.

I stayed the night in the truckers' hostel, took a shower in the communal loo, and positioned myself early in the morning on the route going east. "No problem, mate," said the man in the pub, "You'll find ten or twelve cars a day on that road."

As the sun rose and the flies practiced hit-and-run attacks I began to wonder. Along came an aborigine in khaki shorts and bare feet, doing his walkabout. He stopped to talk. Although there was not a cloud in the sky, I asked him "You think it will rain?"

He sniffed the sky. "After lunch him rain," he declared.

"Mateness." Of course the aborigine was right, and I was about to take shelter under a tree when a car stopped. It was a shoe salesman from Brisbane, driving alone, who wanted me to take the wheel so he could get drunk, which he promptly did. I finished the last 200 miles to Mount Isa with him snoring happily on my shoulder.

Mount Isa sits on one of the largest underground mines in the world, out of which pours copper, lead, zinc, and miners with arms like bowling pins. If you think Australians are only somewhat rough-hewn, check out the pub patrons in Mt. Isa on a Saturday night. "It's our sense of mateness," one of them explained, slamming me on the back yet one more time. Scapula-crunching Aussies notwithstanding, Mt. Isa had a public swimming pool, a welcome sight in the fierce Australian desert.



Am I encountering kangaroos, or are they encountering me? Somewhere in the middle of Australia, 1968.

Steaming the Pacific



A couple of my cabin-mates pose in front of the *Caledonian* at the dock in Noumea, New Caledonia.

Travel Bum as Just Plain Bum. Hitching out of Mount Isa, I fell in with an Australian named Harry, who introduced me to the “People’s Palaces.” Run by the Salvation Army, they seemed to be everywhere in rural Australia. Each one provided a dormitory bed and dinner for free, or for any donation you wished to make.

When you arrived they locked up your clothes and handed you pajamas to wear. You sat through a lightly denominational prayer meeting followed by stew and bread. Until lights out at nine o’clock you were free to browse their extensive collection of religious tracts. Then at six the next morning it was coffee, more bread, and out the door.

Reaching the Beaches. Once on the coast, nourished by the sweet smell of the Pacific, I headed north to Cairns and ferried out to Green Island, a bit of tropical lushness only 17 degrees south of the Equator. I have snorkeled and scubaed in Hawaii, Mexico, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and southern California, but Green Island seemed the richest of them all. The fish staked out their territories with precision, so

there were flocks of little yellow ones here, large silver ones there, and red-and-green ones in a bunch nibbling at your toes. After such a fine display it felt almost unkind to end the day with a fish dinner.

Switching from hitchhiking to bus travel, I made a lazy progress south along the Queensland coast. It was late March, the fading end of summer. In the Brisbane zoo I was chased by an angry emu and snuggled by a sleepy koala. Surfer’s Paradise, a sort of Aussie Ft. Lauderdale, offered both crashing surf and bikinied beach bunnies as only Down Under can make them. Finally I rolled into the Sydney bus terminal, a day before my ship was due to sail across the Pacific. Not bad timing for a 13,000-mile overland trek that had started in France 88 days earlier.

Steaming the Pacific

I had booked my berth on the *Caledonian* six months before; travel by passenger liner was disappearing and I wanted one last fling. At the Messageries Maritimes headquarters on the

Travel Bumming: The Pacific

Marseille waterfront—an art-deco palace already showing the seedy look of imminent abandonment—I had shelled out \$420 for a third-class ticket from Sydney to Panama, which I had carefully stowed in the bottom of my pack.

The great ship stood white and regal at the Sydney pier. It was a voyage made for nostalgia,

Passenger Ships

WASHINGTON IRVING wrote in praise of sea travel. A passage by ship, he maintained, represented the ideal way to erase one's impressions of one continent before taking on the experiences of another. He saw a week or so at sea as having somewhat the same function as the bland sorbet that separates the fish course from the meat in a well-regulated gourmet dinner.

A month crossing the Pacific in 1967 provided much of the cultural resetting that Irving praised. By the time I quitted the ship in Panama I had shaken Asia from my mind and was ready for the bus trip north to America and new employment. The month's passage at sea had reset my perceptions as no other experience could.

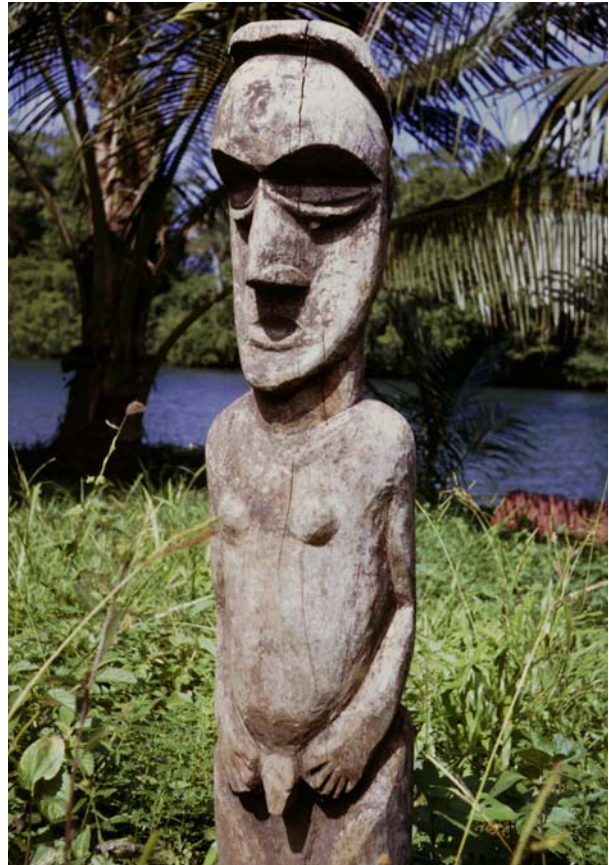
My first sea trip, a six-day struggle through the North Atlantic waves from Boston to Liverpool in September, 1950, was also a true passage. At the evening dances it was comical to see the herd waltzing *en masse* from one end of the ball-room to the other as the ship rolled. But it was the way to go. The alternative—flying by propeller via Gander, Newfoundland, and Shannon, Ireland—was almost as uncomfortable. And six days fighting the sea provided a decisive break between life in America and life in London.

In my later years, raising a family, I started taking cruises. Cruising can be a lot of fun; but, alas, a ship that returns to the same port that it left remains chained to the land. It is a floating resort, not a means of passage. The people aboard achieve no cultural resetting, for they are not really going anywhere. Even though they are sailing the sea, cruise line “guests” are not true passengers.

for she was making her last trip, destined to be broken up at the other end. We cast off with all the ceremonies and settled down to three French meals a day and all the wine we could drink.

A Lazy Voyage. My companions in the six-berth third-class cabin included a Canadian professor of geography, a Swedish engineer, a Swiss language teacher, an Australian student, and a funny little German named Alfred, whose quasi-Nazi spoutings earned him progressively smaller helpings from our discriminating French waiter. Third class was far more interesting than first or second, which seemed to be filled with retired colonial servants heading back to France. I read old copies of Blackwood's Magazine and reclaimed my taste for civilized conversation.

We took 36 days to reach Panama, sixteen of which we spent loading copra at various islands—New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, the Societies and the Marquesas. On our days in port we swam, snorkeled, and explored the back roads of Polynesia. During the long tropical



A tiki taking a whizz on Efate Island, one of the New Hebrides.

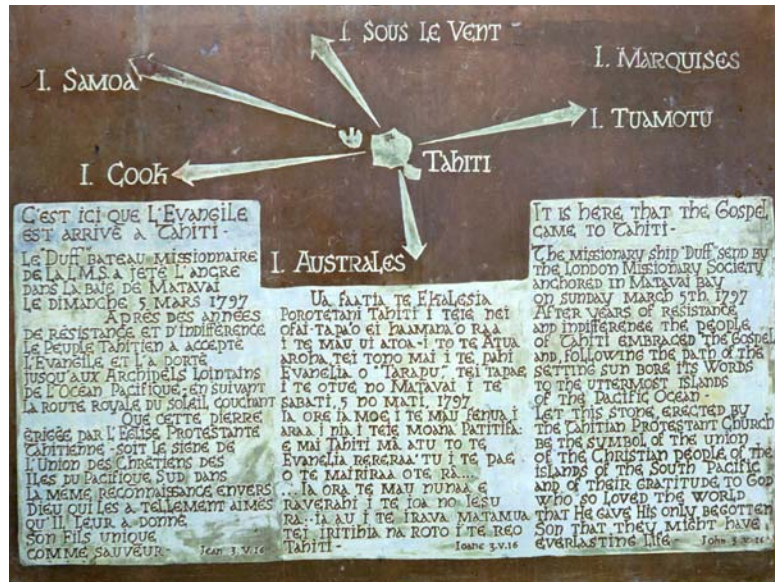
Steaming the Pacific

evenings at sea we sat out on deck, taking the world apart and putting it back together again.

Observations on the Beach. Our first stop was Noumea, where I hit the beach for a day. It was a down-home kind of place, with both New Caledonian and French colonial families laying out their blankets on the sand. But I noticed a difference. The New Caledonian families tended to form human piles, with the all kids snuggled tight to mama; the French families, in contrast, were all over the place. As soon as *la mère* had set up Picnic Central, *les petits* were off like a shot, exploring rock caves and collecting shells.

I'm no anthropologist, but that scene on the beach came back to me thirty years later when I read Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*. He starts his book by asking why the Europeans colonized New Guinea and not the other way around. Diamond's answer is biogeography—the

effects of climate zones and crop distributions. But I wonder if human temperament didn't play a role, too. The French kids who were all over the place seemed more likely to end up as colonizers than the Polynesian kids who stuck close to mama.



A somewhat self-serving missionary plaque posted in a public square in Papeete.



Loading copra on Santo Island, one of the New Hebrides group. Each bag of copra came with an army of little black bugs.



A school on the island of Santo. Our visit disrupted their class but gave them plenty to talk about.

Battling the Bugs. At most ports of call the ship loaded copra, dried coconut meat that is processed into oil for soap and candles. The islanders carved the meat out of the coconuts, laid it in the sun until it turned brown, then bagged it in big sacks. Its sickly sweet odor will always say South Pacific to me.

For twelve hours after loading copra the ship was full of little black bugs, at least in third class. They were inoffensive but they were everywhere—through your hair, in your bed, and on your plate. Then they would all somehow disappear. We speculated briefly about the undiscovered burial ground of the copra bugs.

Island-Hopping. On Santo, my cabin-mates and I hired a wild-looking guide to take us into the jungle. He started shedding his clothes and putting feathers in his hair as we got farther and farther from the coast. Just as he was starting to look like a Hollywood cannibal, we reached a large, civilized village and stopped by the local school. All the students turned out, making us their class project for the week.

Putting in at Nuku Hiva, we wangled invitations to a *tamaara'a*, or pig roast. The *pièce de*

résistance, a fat hog, had been dispatched using modern technology, blows from a claw hammer. It had then been lowered into a pit full of hot stones and banana leaves. We lay on the beach, stuffing ourselves with pork and taro, as a covey of little boys dashed naked in and out of the surf. Afterwards there was dancing, featuring Polynesian girls in real grass skirts.

The grass skirts were apparently too much for one of the crewmen on the *Caledonien*—he jumped ship in Nuku Hiva and was last seen disappearing into the jungle hand-in-hand with a toothsome young local. *Cherchez la femme*.

A Pole in Tahiti. In Tahiti we toured the local bars and took a motor launch to Moorea, the model for Mitchener's "Bali Hai." Moorea was achingly romantic and had a beautifully clear lagoon, but Papeete appeared tacky and filled with drifters. At that point I suppose I was a drifter too.

I met one guy on the waterfront in Papeete who was a drifter with a difference. A native of Gdynia, Poland, he had sailed his 32-foot boat, the *Optya*, alone down the coast of Africa, across the Atlantic, and through the Panama Canal. On

Going Home

hearing I was American, he recounted to me in strong terms how the US authorities in the Canal Zone had refused to let him go ashore, presumably because he was from a Communist country. Bad on us. But he was a resilient sort, as Poles are, and accepted a peace-offering beer from me.

He described how small boats went through the Panama Canal. The authorities waited until a lock-full was lined up at the entrance, then lashed them all together and sent them through in a bunch. Because the toll was based on tonnage, the fare for his boat came to something like \$7.

Once More in North America. Arriving in Panama, the little band of wanderers that had formed on the ship scattered—some north to the US, some into Mexico and on to the Caribbean, some south to Colombia. It was election time in Panama, and during the first night ashore I lay in my hotel room listening to gunshots in the streets. Just getting out the vote, I suppose.

The next day I ran into the Swede, who had just watched Alfred, our Prussian friend, make an ass of himself while applying for a visa at the Costa Rican consulate. Upset by too many questions and thinking to make some sort of joke, he had suddenly burst out “We from Cooba, we shoot everybody, chukka-chukka-chukka,”

pantomiming a machine-gun. The round, smiling faces of the Costa Ricans had turned long and ashen, as they stamped his passport in dead silence.

A few months later, at home, I got a phone call from Alfred. Despite his bad jokes he had managed a tourist visa for the US and had made his way up to the Bay Area. The People’s Park riots happened to be at their peak, so I took him over to Berkeley for a little sightseeing. As we arrived, police in full riot gear were sweeping the hippies off Telegraph Avenue. Alfred watched with immense satisfaction. “Dot’s the way to do it,” he exclaimed. “*Alles in Rechnung*—everything in good order.”

Going Home

From Panama I took a string of buses through the minirepublics to the north—Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, crossing into Mexico at Tapachula. It was time to go home, so I didn’t do a lot of sightseeing—the trip was mainly one second-class bus after another.

The buses were mostly old Greyhounds, which had done their duty in the US and then been transported southward for a second life in



North American food! We're getting home! These local delicacies were laid out at a bus stop in Guatemala.

Travel Bumming: The Pacific

Central America. One steep hill in Honduras was too much for the old 'hound; the driver asked the passengers to step down. The men, who had ridden these buses before, automatically lined up behind it to push.

In 1968, Costa Rica seemed to me to be the jewel of Central America. Dany and I went back there for two weeks in 1995, to give it a better look. We took a tram through the jungle canopy and spent a night at the Arenal Observatory, watching the volcano explode every few hours.

But the high point of that later visit to Costa Rica was a short, unauthorized travel bum trip by pirogue across the Sixaola river, which forms the eastern end of the country's boundary with Panama. There, in the Panamanian jungle, was a sort of shopping mall where the Costa Ricans watched illegal cockfights and stocked up on duty-free goods. The owner of this enterprise? None other than Yassir Arafat, retired terrorist and entrepreneur of global reach.

An Old Trip Remembered. Although sight-seeing was not my main goal while busing northward through Central America in 1968, I did stop to revisit the ruins of Monte Alban, near Oaxaca. My friend Bill and I had camped there during the summer of 1955, while we were driving around Mexico in my 1940 La Salle sedan.

I remembered that earlier visit clearly. It had been a clear moonlit night as we clambered over the stones, when suddenly strange voices came out of the ancient temple. A flashlight beam appeared, followed by a couple of professors from the University of Nebraska.

"We're entomologists," they explained, "looking for scorpions. They come out after dark." Bill and I did a quick check of the ground around our feet.

As we carefully tiptoed back to our tent, I suddenly grasped the difference between being a tourist,

snug in a Hilton hotel bed, and a travel bum, wandering among scorpions in an ancient ruin. I guess I returned to Monte Alban in 1968 just to reinforce that memory—to close a kind of loop and to reaffirm my dedication to travel bumming.

🚲 On June 2, 1968, I arrived, grubby and weary, at the US port of entry, El Segundo, California. The immigration officer looked at my passport, filled with stamps from more than 50 countries, and scratched his head. Then he looked at my backpack and nodded in comprehension. Another hippie had come crawling home.

Yet I had missed the Summer of Love and had never heard of the Rolling Stones. Far from being a mere hippie, I was in fact a seasoned travel bum, ready to grab my pack and passport and head out, any time, anywhere. Which is what I did, in 1970, '72, '73, '74, '75, '77, '79, '81, '82, and '84.



The ignorant assume that travel bums are just looking for an ideal tropical beach. Not so. Travel bumming is about understanding and connecting. And beer.

About This Book

COMPOSITION AND LAYOUT OF THIS BOOK was done on a Macintosh G4 tower computer, using FrameMaker 5.5.

Photographs were scanned from the original slides and negatives with an Olympus ES-10S Film Scanner and then processed using Photoshop 3.0 and Photoshop Elements.

Final pages were printed on a Canon i860 inkjet printer.

Travel Bumming